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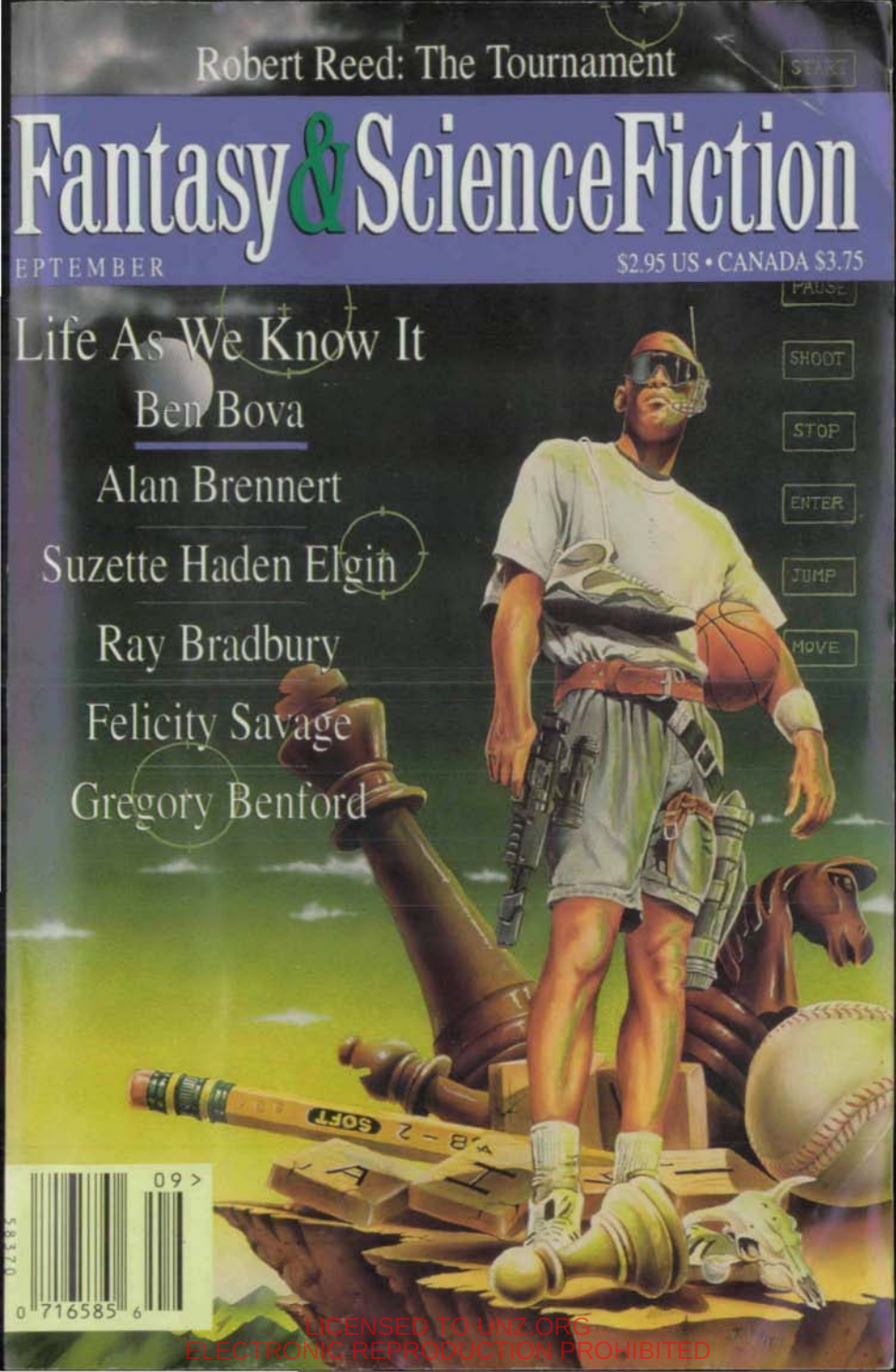

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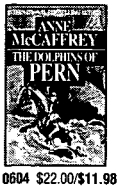

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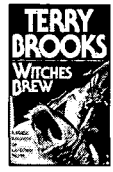

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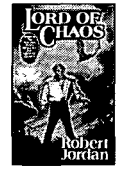

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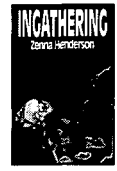

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SEPTEMBER • 46th Year of Publication

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

SOMETIMES information arrives when you least expect it.

I was sitting at the *F&SF* table at the Nebula awards this year, nervously awaiting the results of the balloting. *F&SF* had six stories on the ballot — more than any other magazine — and I had not a clue how the voting had gone. So I felt as nervous as the authors around me, and as impatient with the traditional Nebula format as they were. You see, at each Nebula ceremony, someone gives a speech. Often the speeches are good enough for some other occasion, but too long for an awards banquet. Other times the speeches are irrelevant, like the speaker at the last Nebula ceremony in New York, who spent his forty-five minutes explaining to the professional science fiction community exactly what science fiction was.

This year's speaker knew what to avoid. Tom Doherty, founder and publisher of Tor Books, had sat through countless Nebula speeches. His speech was short, to the point — and fascinating.

Tom spoke on the future of the science fiction field, with an analysis of the changes in the book buying public. I wish I could reproduce his entire speech here, but I cannot. Instead, I am going to quote the parts that fit into the discussion we've been having in these pages the last several months.

That discussion began with our own *F&SF* survey which showed that a very small percentage of our readers were under the age of twenty-five. I asked for reader speculation as to why that was, and many readers expressed a belief that younger people no longer read. Then I discovered the R.L. Stine phenomenon. Stine is a writer whose work would fit into the sf genre if we claimed him, but we do not since his books are mostly marketed for children and teenagers.

He outsells Stephen King.

My suspicion, then, was that young people read. They just didn't read the sf magazines.

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Tom confirmed the first part of my suspicion. He needs to know who buys books—after all, that is his business—and he has culled a lot of sources in order to pull his information. What he discovered is that book buying has increased 27% in the last ten years. The U.S. Department of Commerce has predicted that the U.S. book publishing industry will continue to grow over the next five years.

The growth is coming from several areas, but let me distill the information that Tom presented. Surveys have shown that the higher the level of education of the head of the household, the higher the rate at which that household buys books. Before World War II, less than 6% of the American public went to college. The GI Bill changed that. By 1950, the number of college attendees in the population had more than doubled. Thirty years later, the number of Americans who went to college rose to 31% of the population.

Tom noted: "The GIs are now retired or retiring. They are twice as likely to read as their parents; their kids, again more than twice as likely to have attended college as their parents, should again be twice as likely to read."

The statistics continue to support that trend. Sixty percent of the high school graduates in the class of 1990 had enrolled in college.

Gallup Mirror of America shows a dramatic increase in the amount parents are reading to their children. The survey offers evidence that this reading stimulates kids to read sooner and to have better reading habits throughout their lives. Gallup concludes that "all this suggests a turnaround in the making—that despite the electronic media and its pervasive influence on today's young people, reading may be coming back into favor."

The letters I've received since my early editorials on this subject confirm that supposition. Young people are reading a lot. They just aren't reading what we think they should be. The day after the speech, a person who is very active in the sf community claimed Tom was "overly optimistic." Another writer mentioned that young people don't like good sf, like the Heinlein juveniles. Instead, the writer sniffed, kids are reading movie tie-ins if they read at all. But both writers had no statistics to support their arguments, no evidence other than anecdotal.

Just tonight, I opened a letter from a seventeen-year-old reader from South Carolina. His name is Jeremy Renken, and he shared his opinion about the interests of younger readers. Let me share a paragraph of his two-page letter:

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"We are a different breed of S.F. cat. Asimov is still great, and Bradbury shall always be among the gods of the daisy wheel, but the *Martian Chronicles* isn't exactly what we on the tail end of Gen X are fascinated by. We have seen truth that is far stranger than fiction. I hate to suggest something so audacious, but it seems like technology is coming closer to keeping pace with our imaginations than it ever has before. William Gibson's masterpieces are no longer unforeseeable, and I've met one or two Neil Stephenson-esque hackers who can make *anybody's* life real un-private, real quick."

The science fiction we grew up with isn't science fiction any more. The concerns of the 1950s are not the concerns of the 1990s. I thought the Heinlein juveniles were dated in the 1970s. Twenty years have passed.

Young people are reading, and will continue to read in larger numbers. As to why they don't read the sf magazines, perhaps Jeremy Renken holds the key. Perhaps we aren't addressing the interests of most readers under twenty-five. Or perhaps the younger readers will come to the magazines after college. In his speech, Tom did quote another Gallup poll which showed that "almost half of Americans, particularly young people, say they expect to read more in the future." Perhaps what they read will include *F&SF*.

Time will tell. Meanwhile, this magazine continues to do very well. We did especially well on Nebula night. After Tom's (purposefully short) speech, five awards were handed out. Former *F&SF* book reviewer (and one of the most influential people in science fiction *ever*) Damon Knight won the Grand Master Nebula. Greg Bear won the Best Novel Nebula for *Moving Mars*. Martha Soukup won the Best Short Story Nebula for "A Defense of the Social Contracts" which newcomer *SF Age* published. And *F&SF* took the remaining two awards. David Gerrold won Best Novelette with "The Martian Child" from our September 1994 issue, and Mike Resnick won Best Novella with "Seven Views of Olduvai Gorge," the cover story for our October/November 1994 issue.

With writers like these, the future of sf is indeed bright. Congratulations all.

Special thanks on this editorial go to Tom Doherty for giving me a copy of his speech, to the readers like Jeremy Renken who continue to share their opinions with me, and to Dean Wesley Smith for forcing me to seek out facts instead of relying on gut instinct.

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Ben Bova's most recent story for The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, *"Inspiration" (April, 1994), was a finalist for the Nebula. Since then, his newest novel,* Death Dream, *appeared on the stands.*

"Life As We Know It" is a near-future science fiction story based on current day practices. Ben writes, "I've always been fascinated with the way the scientists at any of NASA's fly-bys have felt almost compelled to invent instant theories to 'explain' what the TV monitors are showing. And then, after they've had a chance to actually digest the data, their 'instant analyses' are usually forgotten. Life is full of ironies, and we are going to find lots of surprises when we begin to explore other worlds in detail."

Life As We Know It

By Ben Bova

THEY WERE ALL THERE, ALL the Grand Old Men of the field: McKay, Kliest, Taranto—even Sagan, little more than an ancient withered husk in his electric wheelchair. But the fire still burned in his deep, dark eyes.

All the egos and superegos who had given their lifetimes to the search for extraterrestrial life. Often they had been derided by the media, scorned by the politicians, even scoffed at by their fellow scientists; this was going to be their day. One way or the other.

Jupiter was going to reveal its secrets to them. Today. Life on another world at last. Make or break.

I could feel the tension in the room, like just before a thunderstorm, that electrical smell in the air that makes the hair on your arms stand on end. Careers would be made today, or broken. Mine included. That's why everyone was here, waiting impatiently, chattering nervously, staring at the display screens that still showed nothing but crackling streaks of random noise.

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The mission control center was a big room, huge really, but now it was jammed with bodies, hot and sweaty, buzzing with voices in half a dozen languages. The project scientists, all the top government officials, invitees like Sagan, hangers-on who inveigled their way in, everybody who thought or hoped they'd capture some of the glory of the moment, and more than a hundred news reporters and photographers, all crammed into the mission control chamber, all talking at once. Like a tribe of apes, jabbering, gesticulating, posturing to hide their dreams and ambitions and fear.

They didn't want to miss the first images from beneath the cloud tops of Jupiter. Even if it killed them, they had to be at mission control when the probe's first pictures came in.

Most of the reporters clustered around Sagan, of course, although quite a few hung near Lopez-Oyama, the center's director. Our boss.

Beautiful Allie stayed at Lopez-Oyama's side. Allison Brandt, she of the golden hair and pendulous breasts. I dreamed about Allie, saw her flawlessly naked, smiling at me willingly. In my waking hours I thought about her endlessly, picturing myself doing things with her that not even my dreams dared to imagine.

But she stayed beside the director, next to the power and the attention. I was merely an engineer, neither powerful nor glamorous. Still, I longed for Allie. Lusted after her. Even as she smiled for the photographers I noticed how she had artfully undone an extra couple of buttons on the front of her blouse.

"Imagery systems check," droned the voice of the mission controller. The huge room fell absolutely silent. I held my breath.

"Imagery systems functioning."

We all let out a sigh of relief. Me especially. The imagery systems were my responsibility. I built them. If they failed, the mission failed, I failed, six dozen careers would go down the tubes, six dozen frustrated scientists would be seeking my blood.

Our probe into Jupiter was unmanned, of course. No astronaut could survive the crushing pressures and turbulent storms beneath the cloud deck of Jupiter. No one knew if our robotic probe was sturdy enough to reach below the cloud tops and survive.

Over the years, the earlier probes had shown that beneath those gaudy colorful swirling clouds there was an ocean ten times larger than the whole Earth. An ocean of *water*. Heavily laced with ammonia, to be sure, but water

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nonetheless. There was only one other world in the solar system where liquid water existed — Earth. We knew that liquid water meant life on Earth.

Did it on Jupiter?

"Jupiter represents our best chance for finding extraterrestrial life." Lopez-Oyama had said those words to the congressional committee that ruled on NASA's budget, when he went begging to them for the money to fund our mission.

"Life?" asked one of the Congressmen, looking startled, almost afraid. "Like animals and trees and such?"

I watched those hearings on TV; we all did, sitting on the edges of our chairs in the center's cafeteria while the politicians decided if we lived or died. I had picked a seat next to Allie, although she barely acknowledged my presence beside her. She stared unwaveringly at the screen.

With a tolerant little shake of his head, Lopez-Oyama replied, "It probably won't be life as we know it here on Earth, sir. That would be too much to hope for."

"Then what will it be like?"

"We just don't know. We've never found life on another world before." Then he added, "But if we don't find life on Jupiter, then I doubt that life of any form exists anywhere else in the solar system."

"Do you mean *intelligent* life?" asked the committee chairwoman sharply.

Lopez-Oyama smiled winningly at her. "No, ma'am," he said. "Intelligent life would be too much to expect. I'll be happy if we find something like bacteria."

Now, as the moment of truth approached, the scientists cramming mission control were busily spinning theories about what the cameras would find in Jupiter's global ocean. They couldn't wait for the actual pictures, they had to show how clever they were to impress the reporters and each other. A bunch of alpha male apes, preening and displaying their brains instead of their fangs. Competing for primacy and the attention of the news reporters who were clustered around them, goggle-eyed, tape recorders spinning. Even the women scientists were playing the one-upmanship game, in the name of equality.

To her credit, Allie remained quiet. She was as clever a scientist as any of them, but she refused to involve herself in the primate competition. She didn't have to. Her ranking in the hierarchy was as secure as could be.

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None of them paid the slightest attention to me. I was only the engineer who had built the imaging system. I wasn't a scientist, just the guy with dirt under his fingernails who made the machinery work. I'd be ignored unless something went wrong.

To tell the truth, I paid damned little attention to them and their constant gobbling. My eyes were focused on long-legged Allie, by far the most desirable female in the pack. How could I make her notice me? How could I get her to smile in my direction instead of clinging so close to the boss? How could I get to be an alpha male in her lustrous eyes?

"Data coming through."

From nearly a thousand million kilometers away, my cameras were functioning. Had already functioned, as a matter of fact, more than ten hours ago. It took that long for the telemetry signal to travel from Jupiter to our antennas out in the desert.

Suddenly all their jabbering stopped. Mission control fell absolutely silent. The first images began to raster across the main display screens, line by line. Live, from beneath the endless cloud deck of Jupiter.

Each display screen showed imagery from a different wavelength. We had blue, green, red, infrared and even radar imaging systems. Despite all their theories, none of the scientists had been able to tell me which wavelengths would work best beneath Jupiter's cloud deck.

I had asked them how much sunlight filtered through the clouds. None of them could tell me. Which wavelengths of sunlight penetrated the clouds? None of them knew. I had to grope blindly and include as broad a spectrum of instruments as possible.

Now I swivelled my gaze from one screen to the next. The blue system was pretty much of a washout, nothing but a blur, as I had expected. The atmosphere must be filled with haze, a planet-wide fog of ammonia and sulfur molecules.

"That looks like wave tops!"

The infrared image indeed looked as if it was plunging toward the surface of a turbulent ocean. Radar showed more detail. Waves, crests and troughs racing madly across the screen. A rough sea down there. A very turbulent, storm-tossed ocean.

"Immersion in three minutes," said mission control. The probe was going to hit those waves. It was designed to sink slowly to a depth of about

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a hundred kilometers, where it would — we hoped — attain a neutral buoyancy and float indefinitely.

Of course, if we saw something interesting at a shallower depth the probe could eject some of its ballast on command and rise accordingly. The trouble was that it took more than ten hours for any of our commands to reach the probe. We had to pray that whatever we found wouldn't go away in the course of ten hours — just about a full revolution of the planet, a whole Jovian day.

I summoned up all my courage and sidled closer to Allie, squeezing slowly through the crush of bodies. They were all staring at the screens, ignoring me, watching the ocean waves and the streams of low-level clouds streaking past. Storm clouds, swirling viciously.

I pushed between Allie and Lopez-Oyama. Not daring to try to say anything to her, I looked down on the boss's balding pate and half-whispered, "I didn't think we'd get much from the blue at this level."

He was so short that he had to crane his neck to look at me. He said nothing, just nodded in his inscrutable way.

Allie was almost my own height. We were nearly eye to eye.

"The infrared is fabulous," she said. To me!

"It *is* working pretty well, isn't it?" Be modest in triumph. All the books of advice I had studied told me that women appreciated men who were successful, yet not boastful; strong but sensitive.

"It won't work as well once it's underwater, though, will it?" she asked.

I suppressed the urge to grab her and carry her off. Instead, I deliberately turned to look at the screens instead of her cool hazel eyes.

"That's when the blue or blue-green should come into its own," I said, trying to keep my voice from trembling.

"If the laser works," said Lopez-Oyama. It was almost a growl. He was distinctly unhappy that I had stepped between him and Allie.

Mission control announced, "Impact in ten seconds."

The whole crowd seemed to surge forward slightly, lean toward the screens, waiting.

"Impact!"

All the screens went blank for a heart-stopping instant. But before anyone could shout or groan or even take a breath, they came on again. Radar was blank, of course, and the infrared was just a smudge. But the blue and blue-green images were clear and beautiful.

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"My god, it's like scuba diving in Hawaii," Allie said.

That's how crisp and clear the pictures were. We could see bubbles from our splash-in and light filtering down from the ocean's surface. The water looked crystal clear.

And empty. No fish, no fronds of vegetation, nothing that looked like life in that ammonia-laced water, nothing at all to be seen.

"Not deep enough yet," grumbled Lopez-Oyama. If we found nothing his career was finished, we all knew that. I caught a glimpse of the congressional committee chairwoman, up in the special VIP section behind plate glass windows, staring hard at him.

For more than an hour we saw nothing but bubbles from the probe's descent. The faint light from the surface dwindled, as we had expected. At precisely the pre-programmed moment, the laser turned on and began sweeping its intense light through the water.

"That should attract anything that can swim," Allie said hopefully.

"Or repel anything that's accustomed to swimming in darkness," said one of the scientists, almost with a smirk.

The laser beam ballooned in the water, of course. I had expected that; counted on it, really. It acted as a bright wide searchlight for me. I wanted to tell Allie why I had chosen that specific wavelength, how proud I was that it was working just as I had planned it would.

But her attention was riveted to the screen, and Lopez-Oyama pushed to her side again, squeezing me out from between them.

Lopez-Oyama was perspiring. I could see drops of sweat glistening on his bald spot.

"Deeper," he muttered. "We've got to go deeper. The ocean is heated from below. Life forms must be down there."

I thought I heard a slightly desperate accent on the word "must."

"Spectrographic data coming in," announced mission control.

All eyes turned to the screen that began to show the smears and bands of colors from the probe's mass spectrometer. All eyes except mine. I kept my attention on the images from the laser-illuminated sea. They were becoming cloudy, it seemed to me.

"There's the ammonia band," someone said.

"And carbon compounds, I think."

"My god, those are *organics*!"

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"Organic compounds in the water!"

"Life."

"Don't jump to conclusions," Lopez-Oyama warned. But his voice was shaking with excitement.

Allie actually clutched at my shoulder. "Can your cameras *see* anything?"

The water was cloudy, murky, even where the laser beam swept through; it looked like a thin fog, glistening but obscuring.

"The ocean's filled with organic chemicals at this level," one of the scientists said.

"Particles," corrected another scientist.

"Food," somebody quipped.

"For who?"

"Deeper," Sagan said, his voice surprisingly strong. "The organic particles are drifting downward. If there's anything in that ocean that eats them, it's down at a deeper level."

The probe was designed to attain neutral buoyancy at a depth of a hundred kilometers. We were approaching that depth now. It might not be enough.

"How deep can we push it?" Lopez-Oyama asked no one in particular.

Immediately a dozen opinions sprang out of the eager, excited, sweaty chattering apes. Earlier probes had been crushed like soda cans by the immense pressure of the Jovian ocean. But I knew that the probe's limits were not only structural, but communications-based. The probe could not hold more than a hundred kilometers of the hair-thin optical fiber that carried its comm signals to the surface of the ocean. So even if it could survive lower depths, we would lose touch with it.

"What's that?"

In the hazy light, a dark shape drifted by, too distant to make out any detail.

"Follow it!" Lopez-Oyama snapped.

Then his face reddened. It would take some ten hours for his order to reach the probe. In his excitement he had forgotten.

Allie turned to me. "Are the close-up cameras working?"

They were. I gestured toward the screens that showed their imagery. The dark hulk, whatever it was, had not come within the narrow focus of either

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of the close-view cameras. Both screens showed nothing but the cloudy water, tinted sickly green by the laser light.

"Another one!" somebody shouted.

This time the shape drifted past the view of one of the close-up cameras, briefly. We saw a bulbous dark dome, almost spherical, with snake-like appendages dangling from its bottom.

"Tentacles!"

"It's an animal! Like an octopus!"

I scanned the numerical data on the bottom of the screen. The object, whatever it was, was three and a half kilometers from the probe. And it was four hundred and thirty-two meters long, from the top of its dome to the tip of its tentacles. Huge. Fifteen times bigger than a blue whale. Immense.

"It's not moving."

"It's drifting in the current."

"The tentacles are just hanging there. No activity that I can see."

"Conserving energy?"

"Maybe that's the way it hunts for prey."

"Trolling?"

It looked dead to me. Inert. Unmoving. It drifted out of the close-up camera's view and all the heads in the room swivelled to the wide-angle view. The dark lump did nothing to show it might be alive.

"What's the spectrograph show?"

"Not a helluva lot."

"Absorption bands, lots of them."

"Chlorophyll?"

"Don't be a butthead!"

Allie was the only one who seemed to realize the significance of what we were seeing. "If it's an animal, it's either in a quiescent, resting phase...or it's dead."

"The first extraterrestrial creature we find and it's dead," somebody groused.

"There'll be more," said Lopez-Oyama, almost cheerfully.

I looked across the room at Sagan. He was leaning forward in his wheelchair, eyes intent on the screens, as if he could make something more appear just by concentrating. The reporters were gaping, not saying a word for a blessed change, forgetting to ask questions while the underwater views of the Jovian ocean filled the display screens.

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Then I looked at Allie again. Her lovely face was frozen in an expression of...what? Fear? Dread? Did she have the same terrible suspicion that was building in my mind?

It was almost another hour before we saw another of the tentacled creatures. The probe had reached its maximum depth and was drifting through the murky water. Particles floated past the cameras, some of them as big as dinner plates. None of them active. They all just drifted by, sinking slowly like dark chunks of soot meandering toward the bottom of that sunless sea.

Then we saw the second of the octopods. And quickly afterward, an entire school of them, hundreds, perhaps a thousand or more. The sensors on the probe went into overdrive; the automatic analysis programs would count the creatures for us. We simply stared at them.

Different sizes. Lots of small ones — if something a dozen times the size of a whale can be called small.

"Babies," Allie murmured.

A family group, I thought. A clan. All of them dead. There was no mistaking it now. My cameras showed them clearly. Big saucer eyes clouded and unmoving. Open wounds in some of them. Tentacles hanging limply. They were just drifting along like ghosts, immense dark shadows that once had been alive.

Time lost all meaning for us. The big mission control center fell absolutely silent. Even the most assertive and egocentric of the male apes among us stopped trying to make instant theories and simply stared at a scene of devastation. A holocaust.

At last Lopez-Oyama whispered, "They're all dead. The whole fucking planet's dead."

Then we saw the city. A sort of collective gasp went through the crowded mission control room when it came into view.

It was a structure, a vast, curving structure that floated in that mighty ocean, graceful despite its immense size. Curves atop curves. Huge round ports and beautifully symmetrical archways, a gigantic city built by or for the immense creatures that floated, dead and decaying, before our camera eyes.

The numbers flickering at the bottom of the screens told us that the city was hundreds of kilometers away from our lenses, yet it filled the screens of the narrow-view cameras. We could see delicate traceries along its massive curving flank, curves and whorls etched into its structure.

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"Writing," someone breathed.

A dream city, built of alien inspirations and desires. It staggered our earthbound senses, dwarfed us with its immensity and grandeur. It was enormous yet graceful and entirely beautiful in an eerie, unearthly way. It was dead.

As it swung slowly, majestically, in the powerful ocean currents we saw that it was only a fragment of the original structure, a piece somehow torn off from its original whole. Jagged cracks and ragged edges showed where it had been ripped away from the rest of the city. To me it looked like a fragment of an enormous Easter egg shell, beautifully decorated, that had been smashed by some titanic unseen malevolency.

"War?" someone's voice whispered plaintively. "Did they destroy themselves?"

But I knew better. And I couldn't stand it. I turned away from the screens, away from the views of dead Jupiter, and pushed through the crowd that was still gaping stupidly at my cameras' views. I was suffocating, strangling. I had to have fresh air or die.

I bolted out the main doors and into the corridor, empty and silent, deserted by all the people who had crammed mission control. The first outside door I could find I kicked through, heedless of the red EMERGENCY ONLY sign and the wailing alarm that hooted accusingly after me.

The brilliant late afternoon sun surprised me, made my eyes suddenly water after the cool shadows inside the building. I took in a deep raw lungful of hot, dry desert air. It felt like brick dust, alien, as if part of me were still deeply immersed in Jupiter's mighty ocean.

"It's all ruined." Allie's voice.

Turning, I saw that she had followed me. The tears in her eyes were not from the bright sunshine.

"All dead, " she sobbed. "The city...all of them...destroyed."

"The comet," I said. Shoemaker-Levy 9 had struck Jupiter twenty years ago with the violence of a million hydrogen bombs.

"Twenty years," Allie moaned. "They were *intelligent*. We could have *communicated* with them!"

If we had only been twenty years earlier, I thought. Then the true horror of it struck me. What could we have told them, twenty years ago? That a shattered comet was going to rain destruction on them? That no matter what

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they had built, what they had learned or hoped for or prayed to, their existence was going to be wiped out forever? That there was absolutely nothing either they or we could do about it?

"It's cold," Allie said, almost whimpering.

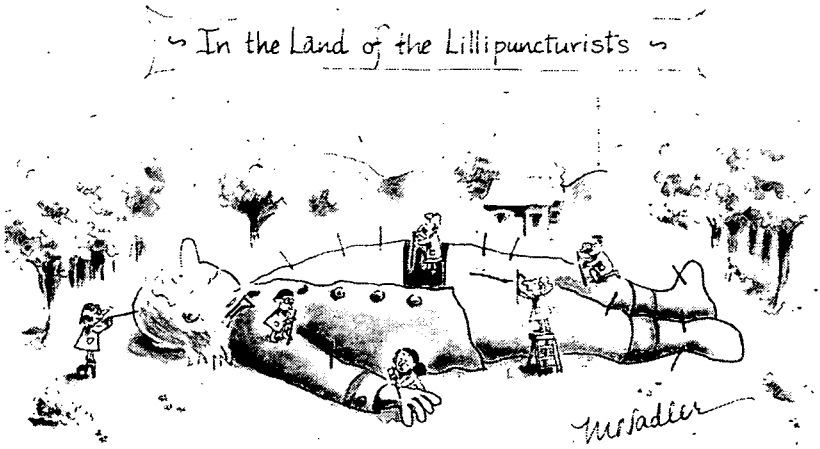
She wanted me to go to her, to hold her, to comfort her the way one warm-blooded primate ape comforts another. But what was the use? What was the use of anything?

What difference did any of it make in a world where you could spend millions of years evolving into intelligence, build a civilization, reach a peak of knowledge where you begin to study and understand the universe around you, only to learn that the universe can destroy you utterly, without remorse, without the slightest shred of hope for salvation?

I looked past Allie, shivering in the last rays of the dying day. Looked past the buildings and antennas, past the gray-brown hills and the distant wrinkled mountains that were turning blood red in the inevitable sunset.

I saw Jupiter. I saw those intelligent creatures wiped away utterly and implacably, as casually as a man flicks a spot of dust off his sleeve.

And I knew that somewhere out in that uncaring sky another comet was heading inexorably for Earth to end all our dreams, all our strivings, all our desires. ✓



Gulliver suddenly realizes that his sciatica has vanished completely.

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BOOKS

ROBERT K. J. KILLHEFFER

From Time to Time by Jack Finney, Simon & Schuster, 304 pages, $23.00

The Waterworks by E. L. Doctorow, Random House, 258 pages, $23.00 (hardcover); Signet, 400 pages, $6.99 (paperback)

NEW YORK City is a strange hybrid of the modern and the antique, a metropolis of the late 20th century with one foot still firmly in the 19th. Its roots lie everywhere exposed like those of one of the giant old elms that once lined its streets. Shiny chrome subway cars (the graffiti has been gone for years) race through tunnels little changed since they were dug by men with shovels, past abandoned stations whose faded mosaic walls flash by like brief echoes of bygone days. Humble neighborhood churches, whose spires were once the tallest points on the skyline, huddle in the shadows of seven-story movie megaplexes. Across the river from my home in Brooklyn, the cyclopean walls of lower Manhattan's office towers rise abruptly out of the water, lit like the hives of firefly bees, helicopters flitting about like drones — the grandiose urban visions of Verne and Wells made real in glass and metal — but not far from my apartment people still raise chickens in their back yards, and I live on a block which still cannot get cable.

Some people find this aspect of New York endlessly frustrating (they prefer the slick modern convenience of suburbia, where nothing predates 1956), but I've always felt it was the key to the city's unique charm. It's also one of the secrets behind the appeal of Jack Finney's beloved time travel story, *Time and Again*. As Dr. E. E. Danziger, mastermind of Finney's time-travel project, explains to time-traveler-to-be Si Morley: "'...once you get away from midtown, there are entire city blocks that have been where they still stand for fifty, seventy, even eighty and

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ninety years. There are scattered places a century or more old, and a very few which actually knew the presence of Washington...'"

(That's George he means.)

Compared to the great cities of Europe — Rome or Paris or London — ninety years isn't much, but there's a different quality to the mingling of time periods in New York, something even Boston and Philadelphia and other old American cities don't have. Old and new strike an unusual balance in New York, and the past feels not so much remembered as alive. It's that sense of overlapping realities that provided Si with the means to will himself back in time to 1882, where he had a splendid adventure and in the end elected to stay.

And that was the last we'd heard of him, until now. *From Time to Time* is the sequel that thousands of readers have been awaiting for twenty-five years. Si Morley, comfortably ensconced as a 19th-century husband and father, returns to check on the present he had left behind. There he meets Rube Prien — the man who got Si involved in the Project — and Rube enlists Si's less-than-enthusiastic aid in a scheme to alter the past and prevent World War I, sending Si back to 1912, hoping to encounter a minor diplomat whose actions could avert the war.

Any sequel tends to have some strikes against it before it even hits the stores, and this one — coming so long after its predecessor — even more so: the idea is no longer fresh, and readers have had a quarter of a century to form their own opinions about the characters and situations which so much enchanted them. Finney has not pulled off a miracle (that is, he has not equalled or surpassed the appeal of *Time and Again*), but *From Time to Time* does offer some pleasures of its own.

Readers of *Time and Again* will recall that Si had rebelled against Rube and the other leaders of the Project when they wanted to meddle with history — it's one of the reasons he chose to remain in the past — and he only agrees now when Rube shows him that his son will die in the war. Even that isn't enough, though, to convince Si of the wisdom of altering such a major part of the past, and consequently his devotion to his mission never grows very strong, leaving *From Time to Time* rather flat in many places. Halfway through I was wondering whether Finney might not have done better to come up with a more compelling plot, something along the lines of a Poul Anderson Time Patrol story, perhaps, where Si goes back to *prevent* a change that would lead to dire consequences...or

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even another quest like that of *Time and Again*, a smaller personal mystery to fuel Si's imagination and animate his journey. (There is one such subplot in *From Time to Time*, but it doesn't have nearly the complexity nor intensity of the mystery in *Time and Again*.)

The limpness of the sequel's plot, however, tends to leave more room for the thing that made *Time and Again* and this book so popular: the irresistible magic of old New York. Finney keeps us captivated with Si's endless curiosity and enthusiasm, amplified with dozens of photos and illustrations from the period. We meet pioneer aviators and forgotten vaudevillians, glimpse Teddy Roosevelt and Al Jolson, marvel at the faces and places of earlier days. Strolling with Si along old Fifth Avenue, cataloguing with him the changes that have marked the growth of the city, we're giddy as he is with the special thrill of all time-travel stories: the kind of guided tour that can only be offered in books.

Finney wisely avoids the trap that so many sf writers fall into: he eschews close contact with famous familiar people, preferring instead to focus on the everyday sights and sounds of the time (though I wonder why he doesn't give more attention to the everyday smells as well, since it seems to me that would be one of the most immediately noticeable differences in traveling to any other era). Stories centering on famous figures tend to lose touch with the details of the period, pushing such texture deep into the background (or off the page entirely). Finney never lets anything get in the way of exploring the flavor and color of the past.

Though Finney objects when readers assume that he, like Si, would rather live in the past, his portrayal of previous eras both here and in *Time and Again* has an unmistakably nostalgic air, and Si's comparisons of 1882 or 1912 with the present rarely make today seem in any way preferable. Flying above 1912 Manhattan, Si recalls aerial views of the city decades later: "the tall, tall, and ever taller buildings, so thick and close in midcity, hide the city they occupy. Often the aerial photographer, searching with his camera, can't find streets or people, only layered walls, the city lost." In *Time and Again* Finney emphasized the different character of the old city, the greater opportunity for spontaneous joy and community, for the pleasures of a simpler time, and Si finds a somewhat altered but still clearly preferable personality in 1912. People's faces, he notes, looked "serene...cheerful, eyes fully open, aware of and enjoying this

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particular day.... They didn't seem afraid .... Or worried, most of them. And no one I saw looked angry."

At first it seems that Finney indulges in the kind of blinkered nostalgia so popular in Gingrich's Washington, rosy-hued longing for the simpler and purer worlds of the Victorians and Edwardians. Finney doesn't ignore the problems of the past as sweepingly as our politicians do, but the plight of orphans and child laborers, the choking pollution of coal smoke, the rampant sexism and racism, the economic chasm between rich and poor...these aspects of history receive even less attention here in *From Time to Time* than they did in *Time and Again*, where they were addressed mainly as an afterthought.

Upon reflection, though, Finney seems not so much nostalgic as simply optimistic. Si's good-natured, upbeat eye prefers to focus on the pleasant aspects of his world, be it 1882, 1912, or today. At one point, for instance, he waves to a girl on a passing streetcar, and observes when she waves back that a girl of the 1880s wouldn't have, nor would a girl of the later 20th century; that sense of confidence and innocent adventurousness belongs to this particular historical moment, and it delights him. He tends to notice the most appealing things about whatever time he's in, and if that gives *From Time to Time* and *Time and Again* a nostalgic flavor, it's a more agreeable one than most of today's politicized hindsight yearnings.

Several months ago, in an editorial in this magazine, Kristine Kathryn Rusch called for a renewal of sf's sense of adventure, and I think *From Time to Time* offers an excellent example of the kind of writing she meant. Finney doesn't offer the depth of characterization, the flights of metaphor, the layers of meaning, or the other cardinal pleasures of the "literary" novel, nor does he develop a stunning new scientific (or science-fictional) concept, but *From Time to Time* does provide the kick Rusch was talking about that so much contemporary fiction, inside and outside the field, often lacks. Si Morley is the ideal protagonist for such a diverting tale: affable, sensible, just introspective enough to be interesting without slowing the action down. At one point, Si muses that "underneath the newly evolved reasoning portion of our human minds, the old primitive way by which we actually reach our opinions and decisions still exists powerfully as ever." It's to that "primitive," intuitive level that the sense of adventure most appeals. And just as Si doesn't operate entirely on that level, neither should "adven-

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ture" fiction ignore the reasoning part of its readers' minds, and that's what sets *From Time to Time* apart from much of what passes for escapist entertainment these days. It may not be a "serious" book, in the sense that is often meant, but it does take its material and itself seriously. Too much of the written entertainment today thinks it can dispense with higher intellectual functions of any sort — it's often sloppy, wordy, and unsophisticated, uncritically preferring effect over narrative logic; it often draws its structure and narrative conventions from television. Finney knows that one need not write down to one's readers in order to generate a sense of adventure — that in fact writing a book as a book, rather than a kind of ersatz printed version of a TV script, makes for a much more entertaining and adventurous tale. He offers a smart, snappy yarn enlivened by the inherent thrill of time travel and the particular excitement of old New York — not serious literature, perhaps, but serious fun.

E. L. Doctorow's *The Waterworks*, recently released in paperback, takes a very different but in many ways complementary look at the New York City of earlier days. It's different not only in its portrait of the city, and its mood and atmosphere, but also in its narrative approach: Doctorow is much more self-consciously literary, and where Finney presents the past through the eyes of a time traveler, filtered through a contemporary perspective, Doctorow adopts the method of the historical novelist, using a narrator of the period. This way, the details of the time are at once more subtle and obscured — to the narrator they are everyday and unremarkable, and the reader must make any comparisons with present-day New York on their own — and also (perhaps as a result) more organic and palpable. We are not touring the past with Doctorow; we are in it, viewing it like disembodied spirits, flies on the wall.

The Waterworks takes us to 1871, more than four decades before the events of *From Time to Time*. Doctorow's narrator is McIlvaine, editor of one of the city's many young newspapers, who is dragged by curiosity and circumstance into the family intrigues of one of his freelance writers, Martin Pemberton. Martin is the son of Augustus Pemberton, a corrupt businessman who made his fortune dealing shoddy goods to the Union army, and by dabbling in the slave trade. Martin rebelled against his father's ways and got himself disowned not long before the old-

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man's death; when Martin comes to McIlvaine declaring in somber tones that his father is still alive, McIlvaine assumes he's speaking figuratively about the general presence of evil. But then Martin disappears, and McIlvaine's inquiries begin to give surprising credence to Martin's claims. Without giving too much away, McIlvaine becomes enmeshed in a bizarre (and genuinely science-fictional) plot involving a mad scientist, Boss Tweed, and the yearnings of rich old men for immortality.

McIlvaine sees a much darker, grittier city than Si Morley; his observations tend to follow his mood. At times he can be positive and upbeat, celebrating the vivacity and energy of the city: "O my Manhattan!" he declares early on. "Standing on any corner I could swear I heard the telegraphy singing through the wires." At others he's brooding and dreary, seeing the city as a kind of embodiment of human sin: imagining how "the lungs of the young country boy fill for the first time with the sickening air of the meat district...the stockyards and slaughterhouses. Perhaps he thinks he has landed not in New York but on the chest of a monstrous carcass and is inhaling the odor of its huge bloody being." Most of the time, though, McIlvaine's eye merely reports what it sees, seemingly without evaluation, and what he sees is a more realistic and complete picture of the city than Si ever gets. "Greene Street was known for its prostitutes," notes McIlvaine, among other things.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of the difference between Doctorow's and Finney's impressions of the city comes when they mention the "beer boys," urchins who would carry pails to bars to have them filled with beer. Finney shows us the beer boys in a wonderful, touching, authentic scene, where Si has joined a bunch of third-tier vaudevillians after hours on their apartment house stoop. A beer boy comes by collecting orders and coins before hustling off with his pail, and it seems so charming, quaint, and appealing—an evocation of the community spirit Finney sees in these low-rent performers. Doctorow offers a much more disturbing view of these street kids: "They ran the errands of the underworld, and carried slops, and toted empty beer pails to the saloons, and hauled them back full to the rooms of their keepers, who might pay them with a coin or a kick as whim dictated. More than one brothel specialized in them."

Despite the generally darker tone, *The Waterworks* is not without its element of nostalgia, though it's more complex than in *From Time to*

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Time. McIlvaine on several occasions looks back to earlier times with fond longing. "We did not feel it so necessary to assume an objective tone in our reporting then," he says. "We were more honest and straightforward and did not make such a sanctimonious thing of objectivity, which is finally a way of constructing an opinion for the reader without letting him know that you are." When we recall that this is the nostalgia of a man of 1871 for the time of 1864, it shows that every age feels some wistfulness for previous eras, that every age recalls a rosier past than really might have been. McIlvaine reinforces that sense when he specifically attacks the idea of nostalgia on the part of the reader: "You may think you are living in modern times, here and now, but that is the necessary illusion of every age. We did not conduct ourselves as if we were preparatory to your time. There was nothing quaint or colorful about us."

Doctorow resists adopting a nostalgic distance in order to develop a kind of parallel to or reflection of our own times in the world of 1871: when McIlvaine says "I was not myself exactly complacent about our modern industrial civilization," we realize immediately that to our eyes his "modern" is hardly industrialized at all, but rather than feeling nostalgic we instead see the likeness; even then the forces which have made our world what it is were transforming the shape of civilization, and people felt as uncertain about those changes then as we do now.

Where Finney makes his comparison between the past and the present fairly overt and direct, Doctorow draws his more subtly, leaving it to the reader to find parallels, note differences, infer connections. In McIlvaine's descriptions of Martin and his "postwar" generation, we can hear echoes of the 1960s, the youthful rebellion and mistrust of authority, their anger over their elders' misdeeds. Even then, we think, people's view of war was being transformed from the romanticized, glorious image of the past into what we know it as today — a deadly machine of death and destruction, made vivid by the many mentions Doctorow makes of crippled war veterans begging in the city's streets.

Augustus Pemberton, a figure of villainy, resembles nothing so much as the real-life villains we encounter today — scheming bankers and brokers playing with other people's money, making fortunes without producing anything. McIlvaine says, "he was brilliant at brokerage and was soon applying its principles to abstract materials — commercial

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debentures, stocks, bonds, and federal notes"; in other words, Pemberton was one of those who pioneered modern investment strategy, shifting from investment in tangible goods to more rarefied speculation. Pemberton becomes a symbol of the maturation of the Industrial Age; after the first time Martin sights his father alive again, the snow seems suddenly "metallic," as if it were an "industrial process." But it's Boss Tweed, until the end a shadowy unseen presence in the book, who most typifies the spirit of the new age (our own). "Tweed's image," says McIlvaine, "inhered in the shifting formation of clouds, or in the light of each season...as the presiding image of our sense of ourselves..." Tweed's Ring, the network of schemers tied together in their criminal adminstration of the city, McIlvaine describes as "ridiculous, simple-minded, stupid, self-aggrandizing. And murderous. All the qualities of men who prevail in our Republic." Tragically, that often seems to be the case — witness Oliver North's and Marion Barry's resurgent political fortunes.

In the end, though, it's not Tweed but another, more impersonal force that drives the change: Science. Dr. Sartorius, the brilliant scientist who offers Augustus Pemberton and other wealthy men a chance at immortality, personifies the worst aspects of science in our times. "'He's a scientist,'" Martin says. "'He does not think of defending his actions. He is not weakened with a conscience.'" Sartorius is utterly amoral, and it is this chilling, inhumane viewpoint that most represents the changes overtaking the world. It is no mere coincidence that in Wrangel, Sartorius's burly strongman, there are echoes (foreshadowings?) of the horrors of Nazism: "'He's like a good horse,' says Martin. 'That's all he is, a loyal stolid soul who asks no questions.... They're brought up to be that way, the Germans, with their strict parents and titled officers...who teach them obedience, obedience above all.'"

The disturbing thing is that Sartorius is clearly a genius, a scientific mind of the first order: he invents, among other things, electroencephalography, transplanting, and artificial organs. He even conceives (vaguely) of things like DNA and subatomic particles. His evil seems to lie not in any sort of abuse of science, but in the very worldview that science has brought into being, a worldview in which most human concerns do not function, in which the workings of creation themselves are amoral. "'The truth is so deep inside,'" Sartorius tells McIlvaine, "'so interior, it oper-

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ates — if that can be said to be the verb — in total blindness, in the total disregard of a recognizable world that would give us comfort, or in which we might find beauty or the hand of God...'" Sartorius prefigures the many unsettling discoveries made by science in the years since 1871, discoveries which have undermined the old sources of meaning from which humans drew comfort (and have yet to replace them). To McIlvaine, this is the real root of the transformation that has turned the old world into the new.

That, more than the imaginary discoveries of Sartorius, is what makes *The Waterworks* a true science fiction novel. It's a meditation on how science has changed the world. The question we're left with in the end, though, is to what extent Doctorow shares the opinions of McIlvaine — and, indeed, what exactly those opinions are. Shall we decide that Doctorow's equating science with Nazism, blaming science for all the ills of our day? When McIlvaine notes with some satisfaction that Reverend Grimshaw, the Pemberton family's pastor, forsakes his interest in historical studies of the Bible and rediscovers his fundamentalist faith, are we to think that the antidote to the amorality of our times is to be found in fundamental Christianity? I think not. Throughout the book Doctorow invites us to read between the lines, to search for his meaning, to tease out the implications, and these conclusions would seem too obvious to need much inference. As McIlvaine puts it, late in the tale, "if, in fact, there is meaning it is not tolled out by church bells but suffered into luminous existence." I'm not here to tell you what that meaning might be, but I will say that *The Waterworks* is, beneath its gothic mystery plot surface, a work of significant intellectual depth. It rewards repeated readings.

Doctorow's book may be darker, weightier, and more complicated than Finney's, but in the final analysis they are both engaged in the same effort: illuminating the ways in which the past has become the present. It's no accident that they both set their stories during that heady, sprouting time between the Civil War and World War I, for that is when New York became in most respects the city it remains today: transfigured by the irresistible winds of modernity from a rather small colonial city — with more farmland in its borders than pavement — into the very symbol of metropolis, a place of dizzying skyscrapers, endless traffic jams, dirt and crime and magic and dreams. The city that was, and the city that is.

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Second Chance, by Chet Williamson, CD Publications, 1995, 449pp, $25.00, Hardcover

IT SEEMS forever since the last new Chet Williamson novel, so the recent availability of *Second Chance* was particularly pleasing to this reader. I don't want to engage in an excess of hyperbole, but there's a reason for my enthusiasm for Williamson's work: he has never let me down. And *Second Chance* is no exception.

The basic premise is simple. Well-known musician Woody Robinson finds his thoughts turning more and more to the past, especially to his long-dead college girlfriend Tracy who died while involved in a sixties terrorist bombing in the campus town of Iselin, near Pittsburgh. For nostalgia's sake, Robinson decides to get together with some of his surviving college friends and have a party in his old apartment, recreating the place the way it was in the sixties. He redecorates the apartment with paraphernalia he's had boxed away for years, has everyone wear the old clothes, lights the incense, puts on the Doors' "Break on Through"...and something odd happens.

For a short space of time, they are back in the sixties and their dead friends are with them again—Tracy, Dale, and the would-be terrorist Keith Aarons, who died in the same bombing as Tracy. Odder still, when they return to their own time, Tracy and Dale are brought back with them, reality adjusting history so that it's as though the two had never died when they did. The other changes in the world appear to be small, at first, and only this small group of friends retains dual memories of both worlds. They are also the only ones to realize that there's a major difference in this parallel world they find themselves in.

He is an ecological terrorist that the media has dubbed Pan. The new history-line shows Robinson and the

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others how Pan has gone from assassinations and bombings to a plan whereby he'll be able to destroy all humanity with an air-born AIDS-like virus. They quickly realize that Pan only exists because of what they did at the party — bringing back their dead friends — and that he has to be Keith Aarons whom they all thought had still died in the past. They also realize that only they can send him back, but time's running out because the virus is already loose.

The jacket blurb mentions *The Big Chill*, as one might expect, and a connection might also be made to Lewis Shiner's *Glimpses* in terms of *Second Chance's* sensibility, but Williamson is very much telling his own story here, combining the elements of a thriller with a serious character study. He spends as much time in Aarons' mind, deploring the excess of his actions while at the same time making a good case for the anger that drives Aarons, as he does with Robinson who suddenly finds himself with two children and having been married to Tracy for twenty years. Still, this is no feel-good look back into some mythical golden past, but rather a hard, speculative exploration of the impact those incendiary times had upon some of those who lived through them, twenty-five years later.

Williamson postulates no easy answers, and the book doesn't end the way one might hope or expect, but it ends as it should, and the lessons one can learn from that are all the more poignant and, yes, hopeful for that. As I write this, I have no idea if the book will be appearing in paperback, so I urge you to spring for the extra few dollars to get this edition. I doubt you'll regret it.

The Vertigo Tarot, by Rachel Pollack & Dave McKean, Vertigo/DC Comics, 1995, 128pp book & 78 cards, $50.00 Boxed hardcover & set of cards

This is one of those fascinating projects that simply doesn't deliver the goods — and not through any apparent lack of effort by its creative team. No, it's simply a perfect example of what happens when the suits get hold of a creative idea, opting for a cheap "classy" presentation rather than a work of quality.

There's a long tradition in Tarot card sets of "retelling" the well-known images with elements taken from some other mythological or storytelling tradition. Rachel Pollack's excellent text delves into this to some degree, then goes on with a thorough and highly readable interpretation of the set in hand, com-

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paring the traditional meanings of the cards with the characters from the Vertigo comic line that have been used to illustrate the Major Arcana of this particular set. Aficionados of both will be delighted with her insights and at how well many of the characters make the transition.

There are obvious ones (Gaiman's Death character from *The Sandman* becomes the thirteenth card, as one might expect; Lucifer, also from *The Sandman*, is The Devil) but also more surprising pairings such as the Black Orchid for Strength and Shade, the Changing Man as The Hanged Man. It's all a bit esoteric, I suppose, unless one happens to be fascinated with this specific material.

What everyone can appreciate, however, is the tremendous job McKean has done with the art. Strange, morphing symbols abound on these cards — at once ancient and on the cutting edge of contemporary art. You need no familiarity with a traditional Tarot to admire the wonderful cascade of images he's brought to this deck. Add to that one of Neil Gaiman's slightly deadpan, cheerfully odd introductions, and logically one should have a winner on one's hands.

Except it's all been undermined by shoddy production values. The cards themselves are printed on flimsy cardboard that won't stand up to much use — as well, the package on mine immediately tore when I tried to get the cards out. The hardcover book, while nicely bound, uses a size of typeface that ranges from the minuscule to pretty much unreadable, it's so tiny. The whole thing comes hugely over-packaged in a container almost the size of one of those old boxed sets of vinyl records. In short, the care that went into the artwork on the cards and Pollack's text simply wasn't carried the rest of the way through the project and at fifty dollars a pop, it's not worth your money. And that's frustrating, because with a little more respect toward the consumer, this could have been a wonderful package.

Slow River, by Nicola Griffith, Del Rey, 1995, 352pp, $18.00, Hardcover

Lore is the youngest daughter of one of the world's richest families in the near-future of Nicola Griffith's *Slow River*; kidnapped and held captive for six weeks, she finally escapes on her own when her ransom isn't paid. Naked and bloody, she is found on the street by a street-wise electronics entrepreneur and sometime prostitute, Spanner, and nursed back to health.

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At first grateful for the haven Spanner provides, eventually Lore can no longer abide living in Spanner's world, centering as it does around petty criminal acts, drugs and prostitution. Yet she can't go back to her family either, for not only did they abandon her to the kidnappers, there are also other, darker secrets waiting for her in their supposedly welcoming arms — secrets she can't find the courage to confront.

So she assumes the persona of a dead woman and becomes Sal Bird, taking on a job in a water purification plant. But the past has its own way of settling unbalanced accounts and sabotage at the plant soon leads her back to a confrontation with her family and their own unethical business practices.

Griffith has done a wonderful job, here in her second novel. Lore's story moves effortlessly back and forth between two aspects of her past and the present, each storyline building on the other until Griffith weaves them seamlessly together at the end. What's telling are the details — and Griffith's evocative prose. Lore's voice, from child to young woman, is utterly believable throughout. The near future setting is fully realized, from the playgrounds of the rich to the desperation of life on the streets and the labor-intensive backdrop of the water purification plant.

What particularly pleases me about *Slow River* is Griffith's ability to tell a small story, centering around Lore and her small circle of friends and acquaintances, that still manages to encompass the whole of her future world and imbue it with meaning. She uncovers the darknesses that underlie so many human relationships, yet posits hope and shows how victims can reclaim self-worth through both the courage they must generate for themselves and the need we all have to trust in someone else.

Slow River is a jewel of a book, beautifully written and mature in how it approaches its concepts. It calls light up from the darkest shadows — a light that shines more brightly for having survived and prospered against the odds stacked up against it. In a world that seems forever going more and more awry, we need reminders such as this, and authors such as Griffith to provide them.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P.O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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"Monsieur Vergalant's Canard" marks popular novelist Tad Williams's first appearance in F&SF. *Tad has written many other stories (including one that recently appeared in* Narrow Houses, *a British anthology), but he is best known for his novels. Daw Books published his most recent,* To Green Angel Tower, *in 1993.*

Tad says he can't quite explain the origins of this story. "I was reading Stephen Levy's Artificial Life *(researching for the next multi-volume bloated epic, gasp, gasp) and came across a reference to Vaucanson's Canard, a famous automaton of the 17th century.... A few days later, the story just popped out, fully written in my head." And quite a delightful story it is.*

Monsieur Vergalant's Canard

By Tad Williams

HE PLACED THE BURNISHED rosewood box on the table, then went to all the windows in turn, pulling the drapes together, tugging at the edges to make sure no gap remained. After he had started a fire and set the kettle on the blackened stove, he returned to the table. He opened the box and paused, a smile flickering across his face. The contents of the box gleamed in the candlelight.

"It was a triumph, Henri," he said loudly. "All Paris will be talking about it tomorrow. The best yet. I wish you could have seen their faces — they were amazed!"

"You are quite a showman," his brother called back, his voice muffled by the intervening wall. "And the pretty Comtesse? The one I saw the painting of?"

Gerard laughed, a deliberately casual sound. "Ah, yes, the Comtesse de Buise. Her eyes were as wide as a little girl's. She loved it so much, she wanted

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to take it home with her and keep it as a pet." He laughed again. "So beautiful, that one, and so likely to be disappointed — at least in this." He reached into the box and teased free the velvet ties. "No one will ever make a pet of my wonderful *canard*."

WIth the care of a priest handling the sacrament, Gerard Vergalant lifted out the gilded metal duck and set it upright on the table. Eyes narrowed, he took his kerchief from the pocket of his well-cut but ever so slightly threadbare coat and dusted the duck's feathers and buffed its gleaming bill. He paid particular attention to polishing the glass eyes, which seemed almost more real than those of a living bird. The duck was indeed a magnificent thing, a little smaller than life-size, shaped with an intricacy of detail that made every golden feather a sculpture unto itself.

The teapot chuffed faintly. Vergalant repocketed his kerchief and went to it.

"Indeed, you should have seen them, Henri," he called. "Old Guineau, the Marquis, he was most dismissive at first — the doddering fool. 'In my youth, I saw the bronze nightingales of Constantinople,' he says, and waves his hand in that if-you-must-bore-me way he has. Hah! In his youth he saw them build the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, I'll wager."

He poured the water into a teacup with a small chip in the handle, then a little more in a bowl which he set on the table.

"The old bastard went on and on, telling everyone about clockwork movement, how the Emperor's nightingales would lift their wings up and down, and swivel their heads. But when my duck walked, they all sat up." He grinned at the memory of triumph. "None of them expected it to look so real! When it swam, one of the ladies became faint and had to be taken out into the garden. And when it devoured the pile of oats I set on the table before it, even Guineau could not keep the astonishment from his face!"

"I am always sorry I cannot see your performances, Gerard," his brother called, straining slightly to make himself heard. "I am sure that you were very elegant and clever. You always are."

"It's true that no matter how splendid the object is," Vergalant said thoughtfully, "it is always more respected when presented in an attractive manner. Especially by the ladies. They do not like their entertainment rough." He paused. "The Comtesse de Buise, for instance. There is a woman of beauty *and* pretty sentiment..."

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The duck's head rotated slightly and the bill opened. There was a near-silent ticking of small gears and the flat gilded feet took a juddering step, then another.

"If you please." Henri was apologetic.

"Oh, my brother, I am so sorry," Gerard replied, but his tone was still distant, as though he resented having his memories of the countess sullied by mundane things. He went to the table and fumbled at the duck's neck for a moment, then found the catch and clicked it. "The tail seems to move a little slowly," he said. "Several times tonight I thought I saw it moving out of step with the legs."

The head and neck vibrated for a moment, then the entire upper structure tipped sideways on its hinge. Glassy-eyed, the shining duck head lolled as though its neck had been chopped through with an axe.

"If it was my fault, I apologize, Gerard. I do my best, but this duck, it is a very complicated piece of work. More stops than an organ, and every little bit crafted like the world's costliest pocketwatch. It is hard to make something that is both beautiful and lifelike."

Vergalant nodded emphatically. "True. Only the good Lord can be credited with consistency in that area." He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and seemed to like what he saw, for he repeated the head movement with careful gravity. "And the Lord achieved that with the Comtesse de Buise. She has such lovely eyes, Henri. Like deep wells. A man could drown in them. You should have seen her."

"I wish I had." The gilded duck shuddered again, ever so slightly, and then a tiny head appeared in the hollow of the throat. Although it was only a little larger than the ball of Gerard Vergalant's thumb, the facial resemblance was notable. "But I cannot make a seeing-glass that will allow me to look out properly without interfering with the articulation of the throat," said the little head. Hair was plastered against its forehead in minute ringlets. "One cannot have everything."

"Still," Gerard replied with magnificent condescension, "you have done wonderfully well. I could never hope to make such an impression without you."

The rest of the tiny figure emerged, clothed in sweat-stained garments of gray felt. The little man sat for a moment atop the decapitated duck, then climbed down its back, seeking toeholds in the intricate metalwork of the pinfeathers before dropping to the tabletop.

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"It was a good night's work, then." Shivering, Henri hurried across the table toward the bowl of hot water.

"Yes, but we cannot yet allow ourselves to rest." Gerard looked on his brother fondly as Henri pulled off his loose clothing and clambered into the bowl. "No, do not be alarmed! Take your bath — you have earned it. But we do need to develop some new tricks. Perhaps since it takes *in* food at *one* end...? Yes, that might do it. These people are jaded, and we will need all my most sophisticated ideas — and your careful work, which is of course indispensable — to keep them interested. That old fop Guineau is very well connected. If we play our hand correctly, we may soon be demonstrating our magnificent *canard* for the King himself!"

Henri lowered himself beneath the surface to wet his hair, then rose again, spluttering and wiping water from his face. "The King?" He opened his eyes wide.

Gerard smiled, then reached into his pocket and produced a tooth brush. Henri stood and took it, although it was almost too large for his hands to grasp. As he scrubbed his back, water splashed from the bowl onto the table top. A few drops landed near the gilded duck. Gerard blotted them with his sleeve.

"Yes, little brother — the king! Mother always said I would go far, with my quick wits and good looks. But I knew that one needs more in life than simply to be liked. If a man of humble origins wishes to make an impression in this world, if he wishes to be more than merely comfortable, he must know powerful people — and he must show them *wonders*." He nodded toward the table. "Like the duck, our lovely golden duck. People desire to be... astonished."

Henri stepped from the bowl. He accepted his brother's kerchief and began to dry himself, almost disappearing in its folds.

"Ah, Gerard," he said admiringly. "You always were the clever one."

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Suzette Haden Elgin began her science fiction career in the pages of this magazine. In 1969, F&SF *published "For the Sake of Grace," which was incorporated into* At the Seventh Level, *her 1972 novel about the continuing adventures of Trigalactic Intelligence Service agent Coyote Jones. Since then, she has gone on to publish several books in the field, including the wonderful Ozark trilogy. She is also a well-known linguist, with several popular books on language usage to her name.*

She hasn't appeared in F&SF *since 1986 ("Lo, How an Oak E'er Blooming" in the February issue). We're pleased to welcome her back.*

Only a Housewife

By Suzette Haden Elgin

THE LAST STRAW FOR JORO Belledarien — the event that pushed him over the edge from weary apathy to frustrated rage and gave him the courage to defy everyone and everything he knew — was his little sister's puberty ceremony. So long as Elizabeth, like Joro, had lived at home in his mother's house, he had been able to endure his situation. It hadn't been pleasant, but it had been bearable; Joro had been able to keep his awareness of it well buried most of the time.

Because there was someone younger than himself in the house, who had to take orders from their parents just as he did. Someone he outranked. Someone he could take out his anger and frustration on whenever his aging father decided it was time to taunt Joro yet again about his bachelor status. Someone *he* could subject to taunting and belittling and teasing. Especially teasing. Joro took tremendous pleasure in teasing women, whose reactions to the process were endlessly fascinating; it did them no harm, and it made him feel better about the unjust world he had to deal with daily. He had even begun

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keeping a detailed journal of the phenomenon, classifying and cross-classifying it into a taxonomy of verbal helplessness, and it was his intention to publish the results in one of the better scholarly journals when he was satisfied that it was complete.

As long as it was like that, Joro had gotten by. He had in fact grown so accustomed to the old man's nagging and sarcasm that he hadn't really realized the true barbarousness of his situation.

Until the morning he was suddenly brought right up against a pair of intolerable facts. The fact that Elizabeth was actually going to leave, that very day, the moment the celebration was over and the guests had gone away. And the fact that once she was gone, he would be the only "child" in the house. He, Joro Belledarien, a man of thirty years! The only unmarried man of his age in the whole Kallibar district!

It shocked him, as it no doubt shocked both his parents. Who could have imagined such a thing? Elizabeth was only thirteen years old. She was still at an age when her house ought to have been no more than a slightly sensitive swelling folded like a rosebud against the flawless skin of her left hip. Joro had taken it for granted that he could count on Elizabeth as a buffer for another three years at least, and probably for longer than that.

But Elizabeth was precocious. She had always been precocious, physically. And she had betrayed him without the least sign of compassion or even decent remorse for the misery she was condemning him to. Her breasts had begun to swell; her house had begun to swell. Joro supposed there was probably crisp short hair beginning to curl over her armpits and her crotch...it made him a little sick to think about that. He *refused* to think about that.

Elizabeth Marana Belledarien. His little sister, who no more than three months ago had wept bitterly as Joro held one of her favorite dolls high above her head out of her reach and pulled its luxuriant hair, one hair at a time, out of its silly head. And now, almost without warning, certainly without logic or even common sense, this pathetic girlchild was to be transformed into a woman, fully adult by law and by custom! She was to have property of her own. To be installed in the midst of a handsome plot of land. To be called upon by neighbors, all eager to make her acquaintance in her new role. She was to be mistress of all she surveyed, responsible to no one. She was to be free to do exactly as she liked until she made her choice of husband from among the other young men like himself, who would be courting her in their frantic need

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to get away from *their* parents. While Joro stayed behind, living under his mother's roof like a little boy, saying "Yes Mother," and "I'm very sorry, Mother," and "Father, I deeply regret displeasing you yet again."

It was not bearable. He could not stand it. He didn't require his father's constant reminders to bring home to him how degrading it was.

Little Elizabeth.... Joro had been almost fond of her, before, but he hated her now, from the depths of his heart. They had given her her woman-name for the ceremony; Elizabeth of the Twin Towers, she was to be called. For the house that had begun to enfold her, its cord still no thicker than a supple young vine sprouting from her hip, was apparently going to be something spectacular.

On the day of the puberty ceremony, Elizabeth had sat serene and proud (Why not? Who wouldn't have been serene and proud, with *her* luck?) accepting the gifts of their assembled relatives and friends. While Joro fumed and seethed and wished she would drop dead on the spot, preferably of something agonizingly painful that would turn her into an entirely *repulsive* corpse. Her house, about which so much fuss was being made, was barely large enough to provide her with minimum shelter. No one else, no matter how passionately he might have wanted to pursue her, could possibly have gone inside it.

But even on the day of celebration it had already been obvious that the house was too large and substantial to fold away under Elizabeth's clothing any longer. Joro's parents were modern in their ideas — they would no more have thought of binding the house tight to her body to keep her longer at home than they would have eaten raw meat. It was the first time in his life that Joro had ever wished that his mother and father were more old-fashioned, more conservative, less willing to keep up with the times. He would have bound Elizabeth's house down with a wire tight enough to strangle it, if he'd been given a chance. But of course he *had* no chance! Nobody had had the decency even to ask him what his preferences were. As usual, he was treated abominably, and there was not one thing he could do but stand by and watch while Elizabeth preened and blushed and his parents beamed with pride and pleasure in their daughter.

His mother wept to lose her youngest daughter so prematurely, of course, knowing that she would never again be able to see her in the flesh. But everyone at the ceremony and the obscenely lavish party that followed could

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see that Jannelle Belledarien, who had been Jannelle of the Jade Roof, was proud nonetheless. She had stood in the door when it all wound to a close at last, just before sundown; she had waved them on their way, standing tall and straight in the archway, her cord as thick as a man's wrist, glowing a deep and noble scarlet, winding off behind her into the Belledarien house's heart, pulsing with her mingled feelings of joy and sorrow.

It was awful. Elizabeth of the Twin Towers, indeed! Sitting in the midst of the fifty acres of land deeded to her by the government. Her house — with its two absurd skinny little towers, like two budding horns on a ganglegoat — unfolding around her and growing day by day. Holding court. Joro swallowed bile each time he thought of it, and he had known that it represented some sort of watershed point that he must get past. He could not go on living under the discontented eyes of his parents and listening to their complaints about his behavior. He had to get away, be on his own, be his own man!

It baffled Joro that no woman would have him for husband. It made no sense. He was a man of substance. He was a scientist with a growing reputation and a good income. He was in splendid health, he knew he was not bad looking, he was proud of the strong tall body that never failed him and that could certainly have brought some sensible woman night after night of bliss.... What was the matter with them all, turning him down one after another?

"It's your cursed tongue, Joro," his father was forever telling him. "Women are choosy — and rightly so. They can't go out, the way a man can, and get away from their husbands; they have no choice but to stay inside the house. And if he is pompous and arrogant and unkind, if he takes pleasure in making them miserable, what are they to do? For women, my foolish thoughtless son, marriage is a life sentence. *Naturally* they are careful who they choose to share that sentence with! And naturally they don't want someone like you — always tormenting them, always making them cry, always yelling and pounding and sneering and stomping about! Why *would* they? They're not idiots, you know, just because they're *female!*"

And why did my mother want YOU, old man? Joro always thought, listening to this tiresome song that he knew by heart. Why would any woman want YOU, you weakling? He had seen his father, hundreds of times if he had seen him once, going out into the night and any sort of weather on his

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mother's foolish errands. Did the woman want a peach? Caleb Belledarien would be delighted to go get her one, never mind what he might have been doing when the fancy took her. Did she want a bolt of silk? Did her heart cry out for a flowered scarf? A book? A music box? Whatever it was, Caleb would smile at his spoiled woman and touch her cheek, the silly old fool, and out he would go with a smile on his stupid face with its straggly beard never properly trimmed, to do her ladyship's bidding!

It wasn't going to be like that for Joro. When he married, he would be the authority in his household, let his wife be Someone of the One Hundred Towers and Turrets and Gazebos. He would rule there, and she would do what *he* wanted. His father knew nothing about women, that was his problem. Because he had found a woman who was willing to take him in for her own purposes, to use him like a servant, to provide her with children...children that *he* had to earn a living for, not her...he fancied himself an authority on the subject of wives and marriages. Joro knew better. Caleb was besotted, that was what he was; he was no more than a woman's plaything, though he thought himself such a wonder. It would have been amusing if Joro had not been forced to *live* with him. One's father's foibles; *everyone's* father had foibles. It gave you something to talk about at the club. But his friends didn't have those foibles constantly under their noses; it was easy for them to be indulgent and amused.

Joro's situation was not amusing. It was a burden. An intolerable burden. Something had to be done. He went into the space his mother had generously allotted to him for a laboratory — not that she had any need for it herself any longer, with all his brothers and sisters gone — and he applied himself to the dilemma in the same way he would have tackled any other scientific problem. He made a list. He laid out the data. He formulated hypotheses and tested them on the computer, in a model of his own construction. He observed the results, and he changed the model to reflect them, and he tried again. He was an inspired and superbly trained scientist; he made a lot of money because he was *good* at what he did; and he was methodical. It never crossed his mind that he might not find the solution.

When it came to him, after two weeks of trying and discarding and trying again, it was almost *laughably* simple. He couldn't imagine why it had taken him so long to think of it, except that of course it's always the simple solutions that *do* take time. He had been so delighted that he'd gone out and

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thrown a huge party for the men of his circle, inviting even the ones he usually snubbed, and spent two miserable days getting rid of the resulting hangover. It had been worth it; a celebration was called for; he had provided a fitting one.

The houses the women grew fed on estrogen, the woman-hormone, and he hadn't been able to work out either a synthetic that would serve or a way to guarantee a supply of the real thing. But he had realized, finally, that there was no reason why a house couldn't live just as well on the male hormone — live better, in fact. For testosterone meant a stronger house by far. A *male* house. What could be more obvious?

The modifications were easily accomplished. The only difficult part had been finding a family desperate enough to let him take the house-bud away from one of its daughters who lay near death and had no use for it anyway. He had promised them that she would feel no pain, and she had not; he had performed the surgery with scrupulous care, the laser in his hand like a musical instrument of which he was master. The girl had sighed once and died, her face ravaged by her illness but unmarked by so much as a twinge of discomfort at Joro's hands. She was better off dead, as her family was better off for being rid of her and having the money he paid them.

Joro was quantum leaps ahead of the women. Never mind that they had had thousands of years to refine the process and fit it to the traditions of the culture. They were *ignorant*. It was ridiculous that this matter of shelter had been left to them for so long. He was not about to live in symbiosis with a house, shackled for the rest of his life by his own body; the very thought was repulsive. It wasn't just the loss of freedom, although he could never have accepted that. The thought of having something else — something *alive* — attached to his body made his stomach churn and turned his bowels to water; he could not begin to imagine how women bore it. His first modification, once he had satisfied himself that the house would indeed live and thrive, had been the installation of the tank that held backup testosterone to sustain the house while he was away. If women wished to live all of their adult lives bound to their houses by a few hundred yards of umbilical cord, that was their privilege; he had no intention of doing any such thing. He came home at night to his *own* home, with no wife there to plague him and complain, and attached the tank to the socket on his hip to replace the testosterone that had been used in his absence. But that was it — that was all. Except for that simple task, Joro came and went as he pleased.

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When the government had been reluctant about letting him have land, Joro had been outraged. He had not put up with *that*, either. The constitution was perfectly clear. Any adult citizen, provided that citizen had a house of his or her own, was entitled to a fifty-acre site with all utilities provided. Nothing in the constitution said that this benefit was only for women, and he insisted on his rights until they yielded. He had stated his case and stuck to it, in no way deterred by the scandal it created, or the pleas of his family, or the muttering of the religious fanatics about heresy. And he won, of course. The constitutional scholars were solidly behind him, even those who claimed to be sickened by what he had done. He was on the front page of several major magazines. He had a book contract, with an advance that would keep him from having to work for many years to come. The government was talking about setting up a new bureau, just to deal with the issues his case had raised. He was absolutely delighted, and all his friends — tied to their wives and no more famous than the dirt — were gratifyingly jealous.

He was delighted also with the site they provided to him. It was much finer than the one his sister had. And it delighted him, when he invited the other men to his housewarming, that they had to drive down a long road lined on both sides by imposing great oaks and sycamores. He even had a sizable hill, and a small pond. Let Elizabeth, her of the twin towers not yet five feet tall, try to match *that!*

The house was strong. It was imposing. It was *his.* Joro sat inside it and laughed at the memory of his recent despair. He was a happy man now, a man of property, a man who had crossed new frontiers and made his mark in the world. A man who was proud, and with good reason. He looked forward to a long and happy and supremely comfortable life. He was actually *grateful* to his little sister now, because he realized that if she had not given him the final intolerable shove he would still have been a legal child in the house of his parents, drifting along in a rut he had almost stopped being aware of. He went to see Elizabeth, who had only recently chosen among her many suitors and was now engaged to be married, and he took her a handsome gift to mark his appreciation.

Just eating Joro Belledarien was not enough for the house, although it was satisfying. Once it had removed all the meat from the man's bones it took his bare bumpy skull and jammed it prominently onto a handy spike above the

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front door, as a warning to any future would-be tenants. CAVEAT! the grinning skull said. BEWARE! KEEP OUT! The message was clear.

It made no difference to the house that it would surely die when the testosterone in the tank was gone, without Joro to replenish its supply. There was no one who would have gone inside to see to its needs, even if there had been someone else willing to thumb his nose at an entire culture the way Joro had. Why risk such a thing? All the other men already had houses, thanks to their wives. *Respectable* houses, that could be trusted not to turn on their inhabitants! Nothing would have persuaded them to go into the obscene and obviously psychotic house (*psychotic* was the only word that fit, anthropomorphic though it undoubtedly was) of the dead Joro. The very foolish dead Joro they had made the mistake of envying, briefly.

The house may or may not have known that its situation was hopeless. In any case, it did not care. It was a matter of principle. It was a *house*. An *adult male house*. Better death, any time, than living in symbiosis, with a parasite in its very heart! Such a relationship was unspeakable. Intolerable. The very idea made the house queasy. It could not have accepted such a thing and looked at itself in its own mirrors in the mornings.

The house squatted at the end of the magnificent drive under the sycamores, its honor satisfied; and it waited with perfect and stoic resignation for whatever might happen next.

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In March of this year, Kent Patterson died of a heart attack. For decades, he had made his living writing non-fiction. Then, in 1987, he turned his attention to writing science fiction and humor. He published several stories in Analog, Pulphouse: A Fiction Magazine, *and* Amazing Stories. *His first story for* F&SF *appeared in our July 1994 issue.*

"Dutchman's Gold," a collaboration with his good friend and fellow sf writer Jerry Oltion (whose most recent story for us was "The Great Martian Pyramid Hoax" in our January issue) is the first of several stories Kent had in our inventory.

Dutchman's Gold

By Kent Patterson and Jerry Oltion

"JAN, I THINK IT'S GOING to rain."

Jan Van der Hoff looked up to where his wife, Frieda, pointed to a mass of black clouds boiling up in the western sky, blotting out the stars like a great fist rising over the rugged Panamint Mountains. "It won't hit here," Jan said. "We're on the edge of Death Valley. It rains here about once every twenty years."

He glanced around the camp. He and Frieda sat together on a double size sleeping bag rolled out on the hard ground. A few feet in front of them, a portable stove sputtered, throwing off a flickering light and reeking of kerosene. Beyond that, Jan's brother Peter sat on an identical bag. His new wife, Sarah, firelight gleaming red in her brown hair, rested her head in his lap. They wore matching red nylon jackets with the designer's logo written two inches high.

Peter was thirty-six, already an established lawyer, and the world's biggest smart ass. Sarah was thirty-one, not far behind Peter. At forty-two himself, his blond hair thinning to nothing, and a bit of a paunch, Jan had a

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hard time remembering they were not children. Frieda, with both her outlook and figure molded by her job as an aerobics instructor, had more patience.

Lightning flashed. For a split second, the Panamints' barren sides blazed in gold. Wind whispered down the dry gullies, throwing a blinding cloud of dust into Jan's eyes. The wind was cool, and smelled of rain.

"I think maybe this is that twentieth year," Frieda said. "We'd better get back to the van pronto."

"What? Become the only people in history to be rained out of Death Valley?" Jan laughed. "Not a chance."

"It's the Curse of the Lost Breyfogle Mine." Peter made *Twilight Zone* noises. "Face it, bro, you'll never find it."

"I'm not looking for it. I just happen to like camping in the desert."

"Uh huh."

"So what's this Breyfogle you guys tease Jan about?" Sarah asked. "You've been bugging him about it all day. Big family secret? I'm one of the family now. So tell me."

"Oh, Lord. Don't start a historian talking about history." Frieda put her hands over her ears. Jan winced. Once she'd have listened to his historical research for hours. But after sixteen years of marriage, what could you expect? The fact that she wasn't putting strychnine in his soda made him way ahead of the average.

So he gave Sarah the short version. "I'm writing a monograph on the lost mine mythology of the Old West. The Lost Breyfogle is the local variation of the Lost Dutchman Mine."

"You mean the one in Arizona?" she asked.

"Actually, I've found legends about eighteen Lost Dutchman mines, and I'm sure there's more. Every Western state has at least one."

"Why is it always Dutchmen?" Peter asked. "I smell prejudice here. Trying to make us Dutch folks look careless, like we're always losing our mines."

"I don't think Jan's ever lost a mine, but you should see the way he loses socks," said Frieda.

"What about the Lost Breyfogle?" said Sarah. "Is it a ghost story or something?"

Jan smiled. "Sort of. More like a legend, really, but there are plenty of disappearances and deaths."

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"Oh great! Let's hear it."

Jan leaned toward the stove's flickering light. "Well," he said, "there's dozens of different stories, but with a few exceptions, they have a lot in common. First, there's a group going West. Then there's a fight, a storm, a stampede — some disaster which drives a small party off the beaten trail. With old man Breyfogle, he and a couple of friends wanted to cut across Death Valley. The others didn't.

"Anyway, the small group wanders around, totally lost, and finally stumbles onto a rich gold strike. Sometimes it's nuggets the size of cherries, or ore so rich hunks of gold shine in the sun. The happy miners gather the gold and put it in a coffee can, a blue bucket — never black, or white or red, always blue — or a Dutch oven. Here, Breyfogle was an exception. He was a giant of a man with huge feet, so he supposedly filled a boot with gold."

"We're going to get a boot filled with water if we don't get back to the van," said Frieda, sniffing the air. "I don't care if it is Death Valley. It's going to rain."

Jan, lost in his story, ignored her. "There's always a prominent landmark which marks the mine; an old abandoned cabin or three tall trees. In Breyfogle's case, it was a twisted tree with a pool of water. Not much of a landmark anywhere else, but a big deal in Death Valley."

Jan paused, noting that Sarah's face was rapt, her eyes sparkling in the light from the camp stove. "So now the miners start back to civilization, carrying their gold. They note another landmark, a big one, usually a mountain with twin peaks. Sometimes they make a crude map, but that's optional. No sooner do they get away from the mine, there's an Indian attack. They fight like hell, but the Indians kill all but one of them, and knock the survivor unconscious. Dazed, he picks up the gold and wanders around, half out of his head, for a long time. Finally, someone finds him, completely delirious, rambling on about the fabulous gold strike.

"Now comes the fun part. The Dutchman recovers, hires people to go back with him to find the lost mine. They do find some of the landmarks, but not the mine. That poor Dutchman is doomed, cursed to wander the rest of his life, trying to find his lost gold. He goes mad, and finally disappears into the hills forever."

"Wow," said Sarah. "So you're looking for the Breyfogle mine?"

Jan shook his head. "No. Hundreds of people have tried to find it. By now

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every inch of this desert must have been searched a dozen times. If there were really any gold, they would have found it."

All was silent except the hissing of the stove. Then smart ass Peter had to spoil it.

"My impression of a Dutch miner," he said. He turned his head, speaking with a Dutch accent bad enough to get him hanged in Amsterdam. "Ach, Hans! Come und look at all dee nize golt. Yoost what we bin looking for." Now he turned back. "Hefans. Vo ist dee nize golt mine? It vas here yoost a second ago."

Sarah giggled. Jan was about to say something when a bucket of water hit him in the face.

Or at least that's what it felt like. Driven by a screaming wind, rain hit so hard it went right through his nylon windbreaker and blue jeans. The camp stove sputtered out. The wind picked up the end of the sleeping bag and tried to roll Jan and Frieda up like hot dogs in a bun.

"I told you and told you..." Frieda screamed, the wind whipping the words from her mouth.

"Hush! What's that noise?" A low rumbling rolled down the canyon.

Lightning flashed. In the sudden light, Jan saw a brown moving mass at the head of the ravine. "Flash flood! Run for your lives."

A long tongue of water rolled through the camp. In seconds, it had grown big enough to carry off the sleeping bags. With Frieda a step in front of him, Jan scrambled up the side of the slope. His shoes kept slipping in the mud, and he felt like a cockroach climbing a wet glass window.

Lightning. In its glare, Jan saw that the water running through the camp had become a frothing river, tipping over the camp stove and surging on down the valley. In the distance he saw Sarah climbing madly up the side of the ravine, and Peter running downward toward the mouth of the valley where they had left the van.

"Peter! You'll never make it! Get to high ground!" Jan shouted, but he couldn't tell if Peter heard him or not.

Climbing felt like one of those nightmares in which you run as fast as you can but never move. Jan shoved his feet and hands deep into the mud, trying to get a solid hold. Each movement sent a miniature mud slide cascading down into the water. Rain pounded his head and back, sending rivulets of cold water down his arms and legs. In the dark, he could see nothing, not even

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Frieda, who he hoped was still ahead of him. She taught aerobics. She was lighter and in better shape than Jan. She would be okay. He kept climbing, the slope melting under his hands as if it were made of brown sugar.

A muddy hand struck him in the face. "Stop. We're on the edge of a cliff!" Frieda shouted, her voice strained over the howling of the wind.

Jan put his lips next to her ear. "A cliff? There's no cliff. I've been over this slope lots of times."

Lightning flashed. A few feet ahead, the land abruptly dropped into the night. In the brief instant of light, Jan couldn't see the bottom.

"I nearly fell over," Frieda said.

"I would have if you hadn't stopped me." Jan put his arms around her and gave her a hug. "Have you seen the others?"

"I think Sarah is only a little down this ridge. I don't know what happened to Peter."

"Neither do I. Let's go find them."

They walked hand in hand, balancing on a ridge narrower than a city sidewalk. Jan couldn't believe it. He knew everything looked different in the dark, but surely he would have noticed this incredible cliff before.

When lightning flashed again they saw Sarah on all fours, peering over the edge, her face streaked with mud, tears, and rain.

"It's Peter," she cried. "He's fallen in."

Horrified, Jan looked over the edge of the cliff, but in the darkness he could see nothing. Gusts of wind threatened to pick him up and throw him over.

"Peter!" he shouted.

"Haay...aaayy...eeoo." Jan's heart leaped when he heard Peter's voice replying.

"What did he say?" asked Sarah.

"I can't make out a word, but at least he's alive. Let's see if we can get down there."

"I could, if I had a rope," said Sarah.

There was a rope, a first aid kit, and desert emergency rations back in the van. At the moment, they might as well have been on Jupiter.

"Here. Give me your belts," Sarah said. She'd already taken hers off. Taking Jan's and Frieda's, she fastened them together. "Now, Jan, you and Frieda hold me. I'm going to lean over the edge and try to see the bottom."

"That's dangerous. You should let me do it," said Jan.

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"No. I'm lighter than you, and I've done rock climbing. Frieda, you hang onto Jan and brace him."

Jan and Frieda clung to the belt while Sarah grasped the other end and leaned out over the edge.

"I think I see him," she yelled when lightning lit up the sky again. "Let me out just a little farther — yow!"

Sarah screamed as the mud ridge collapsed under their feet. Jan twisted in mid air, trying to reach more solid ground. Frieda clutched at his clothes as all three plunged over the edge and tumbled down the slope in a mudslide.

Near the bottom, a thick clump of bushes broke their fall. Jan landed on top of Sarah, then Frieda landed on top of him, nearly knocking his wind out. He gasped for breath.

"Anyone hurt?" Peter said, standing over them.

"I guess not," Sarah mumbled. "But I remember now why I gave up rock climbing."

"I'm okay, I guess. Only filthy," said Frieda.

Jan moaned in a positive manner.

"I told you guys to stay away from the edge. It's overhung," said Peter.

"We couldn't hear you in the storm," Jan said.

"What storm? It's been gone since the second I fell into this ravine."

Astonished, Jan looked into the sky. Stars shone bright and clear around a quarter moon. Not a cloud, or a puff of wind, marred the perfect calm. Clumsily, he stood up.

Not only had the storm stopped in a split second, the ground wasn't wet. And where did all this brush come from? There was no brush this near Death Valley. It was taller than he was, and so thick the four of them could barely force a way through.

When they finally got to a clearing, Peter said, "You've been here before, Jan. Do you know where we are?"

"I've never seen this ravine." In the moonlight Jan could see two sharp peaks prodding the distant sky like vampire's teeth. Why had he never noticed them before? He itched for a better look at them.

Right now, though, the most important thing was to get warm. The ground here might be dry, but they were still soaked. In a few minutes they gathered enough dry grass to make a pad, and lay on the ground, huddled together like kittens in the cold.

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As Jan began to grow warmer, the situation felt less desperate. They could not possibly have traveled more than a couple of miles from camp. Come morning, they could climb out of this ravine and probably see the van in plain sight.

Lying on his back with Frieda breathing softly in his ear, Jan looked into the sky. As a boy scout, he had learned the major constellations, but now he didn't recognize anything. Well, anything but the famous Southern Cross, which couldn't possibly be, because it never appeared in the Northern Hemisphere.

Something weird was going on here. He wished he had his camera, but that was probably buried under a yard of mud. He had to record this somehow, though. Nobody would believe him otherwise.

Careful not to wake Frieda, he eased the notebook and pen he always carried with him out of his shirt pocket. On a blank page he drew the constellations as accurately as he could, including the horizon for reference. He checked the time and wrote that down as well, then tucked the notebook back into his pocket. When he got back to civilization he would try to figure out what it all meant, but he saw no need to cause a panic now.

He decided he'd better not mention seeing the Southern Cross even in the morning.

MORNING DAWNED foggy and cool. Not your typical Death Valley weather, Jan thought. During the night, he had convinced himself he had been dreaming about the Southern Cross, the vanishing storm, and the shifting mountains. Well, now that day had come, at least the Southern Cross was gone.

On the other hand, getting back to camp looked tougher than he had hoped. A rocky cliff barred the way down the ravine, so they could walk in only one direction: up. Sarah, bless her, fished two crumbled candy bars from her jacket pocket, so they each had a handful of chocolate crumbs.

By noon, they were intently looking for water and finding none. It could be worse, thought Jan. At least the weather was cool, totally unlike the usual furnace heat of Death Valley.

Walking ahead, Sarah and Peter rounded a bend, then shouted, "Water here! A house! Come on, you guys!"

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Jan and Frieda broke into a run and rounded the corner.

The ravine widened into a meadow. At the upper end, by a twisted tree, sunlight glittered off a pool of water. Sarah and Peter knelt by it, drinking noisily. A few feet away, nearly smothered by brush, an old log cabin moldered into the ground. Part of the roof had collapsed, the door was gone, and moss covered the side nearest the pond. Perhaps fifty yards away, three tall trees swayed in the slight breeze. On the horizon, the twin peaks Jan had seen last night loomed over the valley.

Jan felt an electric thrill pass down his spine. Full of dread, he knelt beside Peter and looked into the clear pool.

The mud at the bottom gleamed with bits of gold.

"Hey. What's this shiny stuff?" Peter said.

"Fool's gold," Jan said quickly. "Iron pyrites. Pretty, but worthless. Don't pick it up."

Peter plunged his hand into the water and came up with a nugget the size of a cherry. "Fool's gold my ass. Feel how heavy it is. Got to be the real thing." He handed the nugget to Jan, who took it reluctantly, as if it might burn his hand. It was astonishingly heavy, and the dull yellow color was right. He dinted one side with a finger nail. The indentation gleamed in the sun.

"It's gold, all right," he said at last.

"Here's more," said Sarah. "Lots more."

Peter threw his head back and howled like a wolf. In seconds, he and Sarah had stripped to their underwear and were splashing about, frisky as young otters. Soon they had a little pile of nuggets. Jan and Frieda watched in stunned silence.

"Hey, why so glum, bro?" Peter said as he and Sarah at last wore down enough to rest. "You scared of the Curse of the Lost Breyfogle?"

"Well. I think... Hell, yes. I feel like I've walked into one of my own lectures. This can't be real."

Peter laughed. "So what's that?" he said, pointing to the gold. "A myth?"

"We need something to put it in," said Sarah, getting up and walking over to the old cabin and peering into the doorway. "Hey. Here's something." She ran back, carrying a wooden bucket wrapped with rusty iron bands.

A blue bucket.

Jan stood up. "That does it. This can't be happening. C'mon. I think we should leave this gold and get the hell out of here. Everything so far fits

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the story exactly. If it runs true, all but one of us will be killed, and the last one will spend his life searching for the mine. I want no part of that."

Peter ignored him and scooped the gold nuggets into the bucket.

"Jan has a point," said Frieda. She pointed to the twin peaks. "Those mountains weren't there yesterday. It's like we stepped off the end of the world, right into Jan's legend. Let's leave the gold, break out of the story, and go home. If we can."

"You crazy?" Peter said. "Hell, if we're going to be scared off by a bunch of old stories, no wonder Dutchmen lose their mines. You scared of an Indian attack?" He lifted the bucket. "Man, feel that weight. I don't know exactly what gold's going for now, but we must have over a hundred thousand bucks. Not bad for ten minutes skinny dipping."

Jan crossed his arms. "If we accept it, we're buying into the myth. Throw it out."

"No way. Sarah and I are keeping our share. We'll keep it all, if you guys don't want any. We gathered it."

Sarah, pulling on her pants, nodded her head. "You don't take your share, it just makes more for us."

"Aw, look," Peter continued. "All last year you moaned and bitched because you didn't get that piddling state research grant. Now, how much was that?"

"Twenty-five hundred," Jan said. The gold drew his eyes as if by gravitational attraction.

"Okay. This bucket's got ten times that much for you. And as much more for Frieda. God knows how much we could get if we had proper equipment."

"It would be nice if you could have your sabbatical," Frieda mumbled, as if to herself. "I could use a break, too."

"Fifty thousand could make a hell of a second honeymoon," Peter said.

Jan realized he didn't have what it took to throw away that much money, not just for an old myth. "Okay," he said at last, "but one thing: I don't plan on becoming the next Breyfogle. We're going to mark this mine so we'll know for sure where it is. I propose we build a cairn every hundred yards or so, so we can't possibly miss our way back."

"Yes, but let's get hiking," said Frieda. "It's after two now, and we may have a way to go."

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They started walking, with Peter and Sarah ahead. Finally the walls of the ravine dropped off, and they began climbing to the top.

All the way along, Peter hummed to himself, danced, bounced around, and in general exuded energy.

"Why so glum, big bro? Don't you like being rich?" he asked Jan while they piled stones for another cairn.

"It's the story. I can't get it out of my mind that we're courting disaster by taking the gold." But when they finished the cairn, Jan took his turn carrying the bucket.

They had just about reached the ridgetop when Jan heard an arrow whistle past his face. A gunshot blasted, and a bullet whanged by his head so close he felt the wind. Immediately ahead, dozens of Indians leaped up from ambush. They had greasy black hair, painted faces, broad-bottomed pants, and carried longbows. Some had guns. One had a blunderbuss.

"My god! Run for it!" shouted Peter. He turned to flee, but three arrows slammed into his back. With a look of intense surprise, he pitched face forward to the ground.

"Peter!" Sarah knelt by Peter's body. The blunderbuss boomed, sending a cloud of black smoke into the air. Sarah fell on top of him.

"Behind you, Jan!" Frieda screamed. Jan turned to see Indians surrounding them. One grabbed Frieda, twisting her arm.

Jan stepped toward her, swinging the bucket of gold in a long arc with all his weight behind it. It caught the Indian on the back of the neck. He sighed like a deflating tire, dropped to his knees, then to the ground.

His black hair stuck to the bucket.

Jan gagged. He'd scalped an Indian! But no, the hair was a wig. Jan swung the bucket again, forcing the other Indians to step back a few paces.

For a second, Jan and the Indians stared at each other. They seemed reluctant to close in.

The Indians were all wrong, like the ones in cheap Westerns. Most wore wigs. Their face paint looked as if it had been applied by amateurs in the dark. Jan had seen more authentic Native Americans in grade school Thanksgiving pageants.

A massive man with a full beard wobbled up, the other Indians giving him plenty of room. He had a wooden peg leg which sank several inches into

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the ground with each step, making him careen like a drunk. He bellowed a command, an unintelligible phrase that sounded like "Dee vrou wen."

The voice reminded Jan of Great Grandpa Van der Hoff, who had never learned English. "Vrouw" was Dutch for woman.

As if shocked to life by the bellowing voice, the phony Indians attacked. One grabbed Frieda. Jan swung the bucket like a mace, but another one grabbed it, jerking Jan's arm nearly out of the shoulder.

Now the peg-legged one slapped Frieda, bringing blood to her lips. Jan jumped him, driving his fist into the man's stomach.

It bounced off. Astonished, Jan struck again. Nothing. It was like hitting a sand bag. The man made a slight gesture with one hand and instantly an unseen force slammed Jan to the ground. The force held him pinned like an insect while an Indian drew his bow, pointing the arrow directly at Jan's chest.

"No! Don't kill him!" Frieda twisted herself loose and lunged in front of Jan just as the bow twanged. The arrow slashed through her body, jutting out in back like a bloody finger. She fell at his feet.

"God, no, Frieda!" Jan struggled violently against the massive weight pressing him into the ground. Exerting every bit of strength, he forced himself up to his knees.

Then a blow from behind sent him reeling down into darkness.

The sun was low in the sky when Jan awakened. At first he thought there were two suns, and that Heaven — or was it Hell? — must be in orbit around a double star, but gradually the two images coalesced and he saw a single sun above a sparsely forested hillside. He was leaning against a tree, and his head hurt like fury. Cautiously, he raised his hand and felt for a wound, but met with cloth instead. Exploring with his fingers, he discovered a T-shirt around his head, tied in place with string.

Frieda? Had she bandaged him after some kind of a fall? Then the memory he'd been struggling to hold at bay burst into clarity: Frieda leaping in front of the Indian's arrow just as he fired — and falling dead at his feet.

Sitting up, he looked frantically for his wife, praying he would find her still alive. He didn't see her body, nor Peter's, nor Sarah's.

The blue bucket of gold lay in plain sight, though, its glittering contents spilled out in a fan over the ground.

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Afraid that he might call the Indians back, but more afraid that his companions might have crawled off and might even now be gasping their last breaths, he called out, wincing with the pain it brought to his head. But no one responded.

He forced himself to stand and search farther, but with no better results. He saw plenty of evidence of the attack — boot tracks in the dirt and splashes of blood on rocks — but no bodies. He should have found at least Peter's. Peter had taken three arrows square in the back.

Besides, why, if any of them had survived, would they have bandaged Jan's head and then abandoned him? That made no sense.

Of course, being attacked by Dutch-speaking Indians didn't exactly make sense, either, but leaving him didn't seem like something Frieda and Peter and Sarah would do. So more likely the Indians had taken them, or their bodies, for purposes unknown. Jan looked for tracks leaving the scene, but he wasn't pathfinder enough to follow any in the general confusion.

The only evidence that they'd ever been there was the scattered gold. Knowing he was taking the next step in the same damned legend, but not knowing what else to do, he scooped the loose nuggets back into the bucket.

He looked around, trying to get his bearings. There were two prominent peaks to the east, one with an unmistakable cliff on the north face. Below them lay the valley with the cabin and the three tall trees and the pool full of gold.

Determined not to make Breyfogle's mistake, he took his notebook out of his pocket, flipped to the empty page behind the drawing he'd made of the night sky, and sketched the landmarks that he could see from where he stood. Then, putting his notebook away, he gathered up rocks and stacked them into a hip-high cairn.

When that was done he took a last, mournful look at the place where his wife and brother and sister-in-law had disappeared, then began the long hike back to civilization.

It was getting dark when he found the van, still right where they'd left it, parked too high on the ridge to be touched by the flood. Jan unlocked the door and lunged for the cooler in back, pouring half a bottle of now-hot water down his throat in one huge gulp, then pouring the other half over his head, which throbbed with every heartbeat. Not caring about the blood and water

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stains he was putting on the upholstery, he started the engine and drove down the dirt road toward the main highway.

He was halfway to Ridgecrest — the only town of any size between Death Valley and Bakersfield — when it occurred to him that he wasn't going to tell the police about the Indians. Or the gold. If he told them about the Indians, they'd think he was crazy, and if he told them about the gold they'd think he killed the others to keep it all for himself. No, far better to blame their disappearance — and his own injury — on the flash flood.

He had his story fixed in his mind by the time he walked into the hospital emergency room. He practiced it on the nurse behind the desk, who interrupted him constantly for information about insurance, medical history, and for his signature on half a dozen legal forms before she took him to an examination room, where the doctor asked him about it again while he unwound the T-shirt from Jan's head and examined his wound.

"Hey, you must be a scout master," the doctor said when he cut off the string holding the shirt in place. "I haven't seen a bowline knot in years."

Jan realized the doctor thought he'd bandaged his own wound. He saw no reason to tell him otherwise. "I wasn't paying much attention to the knot," he said. "I was just trying to get the damned bleeding stopped." He winced when the doctor pulled the T-shirt loose.

"I just started it again," the doctor said. "Lean over a little so it doesn't drip in your eyes. Ooh, yeah, that's a nasty whack there. A little deeper and you'd be playing harp in the choir invisible."

A policewoman arrived just as the doctor finished stitching him up, and Jan went through his story a third time for her. She asked him a few questions about the storm and how he'd managed to escape the flash flood when the others hadn't, but she didn't seem particularly interested. Jan realized these people were so used to hikers getting lost in the desert and dying of exposure that they couldn't get worked up over three more killed in a simple flash flood. The news of the gold mine and the fake Indians might get their attention, but he'd already committed himself to the other story. Switching it now would only land him in trouble.

Jan felt grim satisfaction in knowing that he'd broken out of the legend. It always included the survivors telling the whole tale.

On the other hand, he needed help searching for Frieda and Peter and Sarah. They might still be alive up there.

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He stopped the cop on her way to the door. "I drew maps of the area on my way out," he said. "I can lead the search party back to where it happened."

She didn't look happy. "We'd love to help you, mister, but that flood could've carried them for miles. It could take days to find 'em unless we do it by air, but with our budget we can't fly unless it's a national emergency. About all we could spare would be a deputy and a jeep for about half a day. Unless you can pay for a chopper and a pilot yourself."

"That's my family out there," Jan said. "I'll do what it takes. How soon can we get started?"

"You can't go anywhere with that head wound," the doctor said, but the cop ignored him and said, "If you're serious, I suppose we could get in the air first thing in the morning."

"But that means they'll be out there all night!"

She shrugged. "We can't see anything in the dark. It's tomorrow or nothing."

"All right then," Jan said. "I'll meet you at the airport at dawn."

The doctor tried again. "I told you, you can't — "

"I'll make you a deal," Jan said. "You can put me up overnight, but I'm out of here first thing tomorrow. Either that or you can just tie that T-shirt on my head again and I'll go get a motel."

The doctor blustered for a few more minutes, but in the end he gave in.

JAN MIGHT as well have stayed in the hospital all day. When he produced his map for the cop and the helicopter pilot, the pilot — a wiry, middle-aged guy with hair as gray and skin as leathery as a donkey — scratched his head and said, "I been up and down all these canyons 'round here, but I ain't never seen one looked like that. And I'll guarantee you there ain't no twin peaks out there, neither."

"I saw them," Jan insisted. "From where I was they looked like the tallest peaks around. And I was *in* that valley; I know it's there. Besides that, I made rock cairns all the way out to the main trail, so all we've got to do is follow them."

The pilot laughed, and the cop laughed with him.

"What's funny?" Jan asked.

"Mister," the pilot said, "there's been prospectors making cairns in them

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mountains for over a hun'erd years. You'd be better off pushing everybody else's over and following the path what ain't got any than building more of your own."

"Oh."

The cop patted him on the back. "It doesn't matter," she said. "From the air it isn't hard to find evidence of a flood."

She was right; within minutes of reaching the Panamint range, they found it. But the canyon Jan had hiked out of yesterday was not on either side of it. They found no forest, no cabin, no twin peaks...and no sign of Frieda, Peter, or Sarah.

Until then, Jan had not believed he'd been caught in a legend. He'd assumed there was some logical explanation behind everything, but from the helicopter he could see the entire Panamint range, and the valley was simply not there.

All the same, he couldn't give up without trying everything, so he drove back in the van and tried to follow his cairns, but the helicopter pilot had been right. He was able to follow them for a mile or so, but then at one point he could see four others, none of which were his, and beyond that the terrain suddenly began to look unfamiliar as well. It was as if the canyon he'd been in had been physically removed and a different one put in its place.

Where did it go, then? he wondered on the long hike back to the van. Had he hallucinated the whole thing? Impossible. He'd felt the rocks, drank the water. He still *had* the gold.

And the star map. When he'd drawn it, he'd thought it could help them locate themselves; maybe it would. But for that he needed the help of an astronomer.

As the sun slowly set, Jan hiked back to the van and drove home to Los Angeles.

Dennis Bigelow was the only astronomer Jan knew, and him only because they'd met for a few minutes at a faculty Christmas party. He was a tall, gangly man with enormous glasses, which he pulled off when he saw Jan waiting for him in front of his office first thing in the morning. "Van der Hoff?" he asked, squinting.

"In person," said Jan.

"What happened to your head?"

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"An Indian beaned me with a tomahawk. And he took off with my wife's body. I need your help catching him."

"Me?" Blinking, Dennis unlocked his office door and ushered Jan inside. He had fewer books on his desk than Jan, but more printouts. He dropped another few inches of them on the pile beside his computer and sat down on the only exposed corner of his desk. "How can I...body did you say? Your wife is dead?"

"It's a long story." Jan pulled his notebook from his shirt pocket and flipped it to the right page. "Basically, we were kidnapped and taken somewhere we didn't recognize, but I was able to draw this picture of the night sky before I got...put back. I was hoping you could tell me where I was."

"From a hand-drawn map?" Dennis shook his head. "I could maybe tell you which continent you were on, but I assume you know that much."

"No, I don't, actually." Jan held out the map. "I think that's the Southern Cross, but beyond that I can't even guess."

Dennis took the notebook from him. "What's this stain all over it?" he asked.

"Blood. *My* blood."

"Oh." Holding it by his fingertips, Dennis examined the drawing. "Hmm, you drew in the horizon, that's good. I can probably give you the latitude within a few degrees, then. If you knew the exact time when you drew this, I could even give you the longitude. Only accurate to within the limits of your observation, you know, but it's surprising how precise the unaided eye can be on angles. Did you check it for accuracy after you drew it?"

"I did," Jan said with pride. "And that scribble there under the blood stain says 10:53 P.M."

Dennis slowly shook his head. "You know, ever since those Indiana Jones movies, I've had to rethink my attitude toward you history guys. You really get into your work, don't you?"

Jan shrugged in self-depreciation. "This really didn't have much to do with work. We were just camping out."

"Of course." Dennis leaned over and switched on his computer.

A few minutes later, after loading a star map program and playing with the view until he approximated Jan's map on the screen, Dennis leaned back in his chair and said, "There you go. You were thirty-five degrees south latitude, and about seventy degrees west longitude. That puts you..." He

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pulled an atlas out of the bookcase next to his computer and flipped through the maps. "...hmm. You were somewhere south of Santiago, Chile. About on the 'N' in 'Andes.'" He held out the map for Jan to see.

Jan sat down on the corner of the desk Dennis had vacated. "Chile? How'd we get clear down there?"

Dennis shrugged. "That much I can't tell you."

Jan couldn't believe he had been transported to Chile and back by supernatural means, but an hour in the library poring through the map section added another argument to the theory. There in the foothills of the Andes, about a hundred miles south of Santiago, was a canyon the same shape as the one he'd drawn, complete with a likely looking double peak to the east of it.

All he needed was a good explanation of how a flash flood in Death Valley could send four people to South America, and how he'd gotten back while the others hadn't. Everything he could think of sounded equally illogical: time travelers, UFO aliens, even God.

He even considered the possibility that he had gone crazy and murdered Frieda and Peter and Sarah himself, then invented the whole bizarre story afterward to rationalize their murders, but that made even less sense. In that case, where had the bucket of gold come from?

Ghosts? The four of them had obviously been caught up in an old legend; maybe they had run afoul of some old-timer's ghost up there in the mountains, and it had set them up to follow in his footsteps.

Whatever the reason, Jan felt sure the only answer he was likely to get waited for him in Chile, not in California.

Flying to Santiago turned out to be no more difficult than flying to a major city in the states. It was more trouble to charter a helicopter, but Jan soon discovered that enough American cash could accomplish practically anything. He'd sold some of the gold before he'd left, so he wasn't sweating the price. Within two hours he was once again in the air, this time in an aging two passenger chopper with no doors. Wind swirled around him the whole way; that and the engine's roar made conversation with the pilot impossible, but they didn't need to talk anyway. Jan clutched a topo map in his hands and pointed out the way, and the pilot flew where he pointed.

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At last the twin peaks swam toward them from the horizon, and the valley below them took on shape. Jan's heart beat faster and faster as more and more landmarks checked out. There was the bend with the meadow and the pool of water, and beside it was the cabin. And in front of the cabin, working with picks and shovels, were three people! For a moment Jan felt sure it was Frieda and Peter and Sarah, but when the helicopter drew closer he realized all three were men. Heavily bearded, ragged-clothed men.

"Set it down by that cabin!" he shouted to the pilot, pointing. The pilot nodded and swooped the 'copter around in a turning dive that sent the miners running for cover. "Don't scare them off, you idiot!" Jan shouted, but it was too late. Two of them ran straight up the sides of the valley, while the third made a running dive right for the middle of the pool.

Jan leaped out of the 'copter as soon as it touched down and ran toward the man in the water. The miner was just struggling out to join his companions in their flight when Jan caught up with him and grabbed him by a loose shirt tail.

The man screamed as if he'd been shot, then fell to his knees and bowed his head.

"Jeez, get a grip," Jan said. "I just want to talk to you."

The man babbled something that sounded like "Vader mivergif!" It took Jan a moment to realize he'd spoken Dutch. He'd said, "Father, forgive me."

Jan replied in kind, saying, "I'm sorry we scared you. I just want to talk to you. Honest."

"Talk?" the man asked. "You aren't taking me to Hell?"

"What? Of course not." Jan snorted at the idea, then curiosity made him ask, "Why? Do you think you deserve it?"

The man turned his head to see his tormentor, then gasped. "You of all people have to ask?"

"What, you know me?" asked Jan, but then the miner's face registered. It had been obscured with streaks of war paint when he'd last seen it, but Jan was sure that this was the same "Indian" who'd shot an arrow through Frieda's heart.

"On second thought," he said as he grabbed a handful of the man's collar and pulled him to his feet, "Maybe I *will* send you off to Hell. But not until I get some answers. Start talking."

The helicopter's engine wound down to an idle, and the swooshing

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blades slowed to a less distracting pitch. The man looked nervously around, no doubt hoping for help from his friends, but the other two were halfway up the ridge by now and still receding. The helicopter pilot waited in his seat, an enormous pistol held casually in his lap, but he made no threatening moves with it. Jan figured he would probably only interfere to protect his 'copter.

"I said, start talking," Jan ordered. "Why did you attack us, and what did you do with my wife's body?"

Trembling like a leaf in the wind, the man stammered, "I — we — it was — it was the price of our freedom! Vandervecken made us do it."

"Freedom? Vandervecken? What are you talking about?"

The man swallowed. "Vandervecken is a ship's captain. He swore a blasphemous oath, and was cursed to sail the seas for eternity. He — "

Jan jerked the man's collar. "I know all about him. Probably more than you do. What does — "

"Hah! I was bosun on the *Flying Dutchman* for over a hundred years." As if remembering his pride for the first time, the man shook off Jan's hand.

Jan considered grabbing him again, but the glint in his eyes decided him against it. He said, "Hundred years my ass. You're not a day over sixty."

The man shook his head. "Forty-eight I am, and was when Vandervecken captured me in 1852. I've sailed with him ever since, frozen in time even as it passed me by."

Jan pressed his hands to the sides of his head, as if he could physically force his mind to make sense of the man's speech. When no answers came, he asked the question foremost in his mind: "What does Vandervecken have to do with my wife?"

But he already suspected the answer. Somehow he'd gotten caught up in not one legend, but two.

The miner confirmed his suspicion. "She was the price of my release." Hastily, he added, "Not her in particular, but just another person. None of the crew can leave the ship without Vandervecken's permission, and the price he requires of us is a suitable replacement. By suitable he means somebody we can snatch without too much fuss, and who's able-bodied and Dutch. He wants no foreigners on his ship. But he wanted even more from me. He required a woman who might come to love him, and thus end his curse."

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Jan remembered Wagner's opera about the *Flying Dutchman*, how Vandervecken had supposedly been cursed to sail the seas until he found a woman who would be "true unto death."

"Then Peter and Sarah were *their* replacements?" he asked, nodding toward the two other miners, who had paused in their flight now that it looked as if Jan wasn't going to whisk their companion straight to Hell after all.

"That's right," the man said. "They're what we call 'impressed labor.' We were trying for you instead of the other woman, but she got herself killed in the fight so we didn't have much choice. We had to leave one of you alive."

"What kind of animals are you?" Jan asked, horrified. "Trading a total stranger's life for your own. It's — "

"When you've spent a century on the *Dutchman* and passed up the opportunity to get away, maybe I'll listen to your little speech, but until then, don't start getting all indignant on me."

Jan's bluster died as quickly as it had come. A century at sea? He already knew what he'd do. "Why didn't you just snatch them while they were sleeping, then?" he asked. "Why such an elaborate plan? Why the gold, and the Indian raid? And how did you know we were Dutch in the first place?"

The man shrugged. "Vandervecken told us you were the ones. He's got...powers. The gold was payment for their service; Naval law demands it when you impress a man to sea duty. The Indian disguise was supposed to help you explain it away to your people. We didn't want you in prison; we wanted you out telling others about the lost mine and getting more Dutchmen out hunting for it. There's others on the ship who're itching to leave, too."

Jan didn't know how much of the man's story he could believe, but it did fit remarkably well with historical facts. Except.... "Indians are out of date. You'd have done better to impersonate bikers."

The man shrugged again. "Maybe your missus can set 'em straight before the next raid."

"Frieda's alive, then?" Jan asked, hardly able to believe it possible, but willing to grasp at any hope.

"Aye," the former bosun said, "if you can call time on the *Dutchman* life."

"How can I get her back?"

"You can't. Unless you want to replace her, like she did me. I told you, Vandervecken won't let anyone jump ship."

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"We'll see about that. Conjure him up for me. I want to have a word with him."

The man laughed. "Oh you do, do ye? I'll reckon your tone'd change if I did, but we're cut off now, no more able to reach him again than you are. Which is why we're here grubbing in this damned played out mine; we've got to find us a way to earn a living in this newfangled world of yours, 'cause we're on our own now."

"There must be a way of finding him," Jan insisted.

"Oh, aye, there's ways. Go get yourself lost at sea. Vandervecken's practically the patron saint of the lost, 'specially lost Dutchmen. If your luck's with you, he'll come to wave at you as you drown."

"And if my luck isn't with me?"

"Then you drown on your own, I guess."

Jan looked in the man's eyes, but saw no hint of duplicity there. Jan could hardly believe his story, but he didn't know if he had much choice. He had no other leads to follow.

"All right," he said at last. "We'll try to catch up with Vandervecken on the high seas."

"Not 'we, '" the man said, his nostrils flaring in sudden panic. "I ain't going with you."

"I say you are," Jan said. "You took my wife; you'll help me get her back." He reached out to grab the man's collar again, but this time he fought back; he shoved Jan's arm aside and punched him hard in the stomach. Jan staggered backward a step, recovered his balance, and lunged forward again, but checked himself when he saw the glint of a knife.

"I'd sooner go to Hell than back on that cursed ship," the man said. "And I'll take you there with me if you press it."

Jan turned his head to look toward the helicopter. The pilot held his gun a bit more readily now, but it was clear he wasn't going to interfere in Jan's dispute. Jan looked up the ridge and saw the other two sailors climbing back down. They no doubt would interfere, but not to Jan's advantage.

"At least tell me," he said, backing off and lowering his arms, "where will I most likely find him?"

The man kept his knife poised for action, but he said, "You've got courage, I'll grant you that. Well then, I'd look for him rounding Cape Horn, westward. He keeps trying to get into the Pacific Ocean, but he can never

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make it. That's part of the curse. The ship's always in a storm, you see, and always gets blown back. He tries the Cape of Good Hope for a few years, and the Northwest Passage once in a while, and the Horn when he ain't trying the others. My guess is he'll keep at the Horn a while longer, now that he's got fresh crew and it's right close for him to challenge again."

Jan nodded. "Cape Horn, eh? Anything else I should know?"

"Well, you're supposed to keep a bible on board and nail a horseshoe to the foremast to keep him away, so don't go carrying either of those with you. And if Vandervecken gives you any letters to mail, nail those to the mast, too, or you'll never make it home."

"If I catch the son of a bitch, I'll nail *him* to the mast," said Jan.

The man laughed. "I don't think you'll find that as easy as you think. Mortals can't touch him unless he wants 'em to. But all the same, I wish you luck."

"Thanks, I guess," Jan said, turning away and walking back to the helicopter. "Take me back to the airport," he told the pilot as he climbed into the passenger seat. "And put that damned pistol away."

THREE DAYS into his voyage, Jan began to wonder if he was on a fool's errand. The Tierra Del Fuegan who had sold him his boat had certainly thought so. The only thing Jan had attracted so far had been an albatross, an enormous white bird that followed him everywhere he went, sometimes perching on the top of the mast but usually keeping station just off the port bow. Albatrosses were omens of good luck, if Coleridge could be believed, but Jan didn't know if he wanted luck. He'd tried shooing the thing away, but it wouldn't leave, and he wasn't about to shoot it. Coleridge's Ancient Mariner had tried that and had been cursed to drift, alone and becalmed and dying of thirst, on the endless sea.

Even the thought must have had some effect, for on the afternoon of day three, on an uncharacteristically calm sea on the Atlantic side of the Cape, Jan couldn't get the engine to start. He'd been using the sail as much as possible, both to conserve gas and in the hope that the older technology would somehow bring him closer to the *Flying Dutchman*, but now he was still miles from the Cape and in this feeble wind it would take most of the day just to make the passage.

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He'd just about worn out the battery, but the engine kept firing, leading him on with the promise that on the next try it would catch for certain. Jan resisted the urge to hold his thumb on the starter button until the battery melted through the hull, once again opening the choke and letting the intake manifold air out before trying it again. The starter spun slowly, and the engine coughed once, then died.

"Damn you!" Jan swore. "Start, you son of a bitch, or I'll take you apart bolt by bolt and feed you to the sharks." He mashed down the start button again, and the engine coughed once more, then backfired loudly.

"Arrgh!" Jan growled, yanking back on the throttle. "I'll start you, you Godforsaken pile of pistons, if it's the last thing I — "

The boat pitched in a sudden swell, nearly throwing Jan from his pilot's chair. "What the hell?" he asked, grabbing the handrail for support. The sea had been calm as a bathtub a moment ago. He looked out to starboard; nothing there. Nothing to port, either. But when he turned aft, his hair tried to stand on end. There, pitching and rolling as if in a gale, less than a hundred yards off and closing fast, came a glowing four-master, its sails in tatters, its figurehead etched by wind and waves until it resembled a skeleton more than the woman it had once been.

Another wave reached out from the ghost ship and rolled Jan's boat. He could see the horizon through the hull, and if he squinted he could see flickering shapes on deck and in the rigging, but there was no hope of recognizing Frieda or Peter or Sarah among them.

It was the *Flying Dutchman.* Jan was certain of it. What had brought it now he couldn't guess, until he remembered the angry words directed at the engine. He shivered anew. He'd been *that* close to making the same mistake Vandervecken had made.

Jan had never imagined how careful a person had to be about legends and blasphemous oaths and the like.

Now, faced with the real possibility of eternal damnation on board a phantom ship, his resolve nearly died. Frieda and Peter and Sarah were already dead; what could he accomplish by joining them save compounding their torment? Most likely Vandervecken would simply add Jan to his crew as well. Jan would be better off going back to Los Angeles and trying to contact Frieda through some kind of spiritualist or a Ouija board.

Even as he thought it, he knew he could never live with himself if he did

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that. Frieda had taken an arrow through the heart to save him from death; could he do any less for her?

The ship drew alongside his boat, still pitching and rolling in its own personal storm. Jan reached out and snagged one of the trailing lines as it swept past, tugging on it to draw himself still closer. It felt like pulling on a thick strand of spaghetti — cold and clammy and stretchy, as if it weren't quite substantial — but the gap between the two vessels narrowed until he could jump across with a line of his own to the netting hanging from the side of the *Dutchman* and tie them together with a real rope.

The rope held fast, but Jan might as well have been clinging to cobwebs. The ship continued to buck in heavy seas, and now Jan felt the storm as well, but when it pitched upward his hands would slip through the ropes as if they were hardly more than smoke, and he would drop downward a foot or more before he could catch another piece of the net and check his fall.

He heard ghostly voices shrieking at him from above, and cold chills swirled around him, but neither the ship nor its crew would grow substantial enough for him to grasp or even to hear or see clearly. Something still kept him from crossing over into their world.

His boat banged against his legs, and he kicked it away. The net seemed to grow firmer in his hands as he did, but only until the next wave came to shake him loose. What was the problem? Why couldn't he get on board?

His boat drew closer, and he slipped through another rung of the net. His feet were only inches from the water now. He considered jumping back and trying again, higher up on the net, but when he tugged on the connecting rope the ghost ship grew fainter still and he lurched downward another notch.

It was the boat. His last link with the real world kept him from completely joining the spirit world. That had to be it. Without letting himself hesitate, Jan untied the rope and flung it away from him, casting his boat free.

At once the wailing from overhead became the cry of dozens of voices. The net in his hand became solid and gritty with salt. Sudden wind whipped his hair into his eyes, and when he reached up to sweep it aside, a wave slammed him into the side of the barnacle-encrusted ship.

A shock of pain shot through his head, exactly where he'd been injured before. The barnacles slashed at his clothes, ripping his coat and scraping his shoulder. Wind howled about his ears. At least now the ropes felt solid.

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Clinging as close as he could, Jan crawled painfully up the ship's wooden sides.

A bearded face looked over the ship's rail, staring down at him. "Help me," Jan cried, using his last strength to pull himself above the water level. "Help me, please."

"You don't know, Amerikaner," the man said. "Far bedder you drown now dan come aboard dis ship."

Rage flowed through Jan's veins. Would that idiot let him drown? His anger gave him new strength. Clumsily, he climbed up over the rounded hull and crawled through the railing, finally throwing himself gasping full length on deck. The ship plunged in the storm, moving so abruptly Jan felt in danger of being bucked off. Wind howled through the rigging. Yet whenever the deck fell, Jan could see the boat he had bought in perfect calm, bobbing along gently as a toy boat in a puddle, albatross gliding overhead.

"Jan! Jan! Are you okay?" Suddenly Peter bent over him. Peter's face looked strained; his normally clean-shaven cheeks were black with stubble, and his filthy clothes reeked with sweat. Jan had never seen anything so beautiful.

"Peter." He rose up and hugged his brother. "I found you." Even as he spoke, the wind whipped the words from his mouth.

Peter didn't smile. "God, I'm glad to see you, Jan, but I wish you hadn't come here. That sailor wasn't being cruel; he was giving good advice. Now that you're on the deck, you won't get another chance."

"There's always another chance. Where are Frieda and Sarah?"

"They're below. Captain Vandervecken's below with them."

"Let's go get them." Jan struggled to his feet.

Peter grabbed him by the belt. "Not a good idea. You don't know this guy."

Jan glanced at the sailors who were gathering around.

"If we could get the crew behind us..."

"Ha. If the crew could do anything, they'd have hung Vandervecken from the yardarm and sailed this tub back to Amsterdam 400 years ago. The guy's not human."

Jan remembered the force which had pushed him to the ground during the attack of the phony Indians. "You might be right. But there has to be something we can do. Even a ghost must have weaknesses. I mean, look at

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this ship." The deck's planks were shrunken and splintered, the sails threadbare, the rigging so worn the ropes looked furry.

"Don't let appearances deceive you," Peter said. "The curse will keep this thing afloat forever, and Vandervecken will be its captain no matter what we do." Moodily, he stared off into the sky. "You were right, incidentally. Taking that damned gold signed us up for a term of seven times seven years. Then God knows how long searching for substitutes. I wish I'd listened to you."

Jan patted his back. "No matter. He'd have just taken you anyway."

"No. He can't. His magic doesn't work that way. He has to follow the rules to the letter. He has to pay wages in gold. You must accept before he can take you. Only good thing about this ship; Vandervecken's as much a prisoner as any of us."

Jan shook his head. "That's his problem, not ours. We have to rescue Frieda and Sarah and get the hell off this nightmare."

"Get off the *Flying Dutchman!*" a man laughed. Jan turned. The man stood an easy six feet four and had the biggest feet Jan had ever seen unconnected to an elephant. "You hardly came on. Don't worry. They say the first hundred years is a snap." He grinned. "Of course the next few hundred get tedious."

"Oh, where's my manners?" Peter said. "Let me introduce you. Jan Van der Hoff, meet Charles Breyfogle, late of the Lost Breyfogle mine."

"Ah, the historian. Your brother has told me so much about you," Breyfogle said.

Jan gaped. Before he could respond, a high-pitched squealing music and a drum beat joined the perpetual howl of the wind.

"All hands fall out for wedding drill," shouted a huge, thick-necked man. Behind him, another man blew on a whistle, and a boy pounded on a drum. "Captain Vandervecken's orders. All hands on deck for the wedding."

"A wedding?" Peter said.

"You ain't heard? Vandervecken is going to make at least one of the women marry him. Maybe both," Breyfogle said.

Peter gave a sort of choking roar, and turned. Breyfogle grabbed him, holding him as easily as a boy might hold a kitten. "Calm down, Peter. Or Vandervecken will whip you again."

"He *whipped* you?" Jan asked.

"With a cat-of-nine-tails until you could see his ribs," said Breyfogle.

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"God, I'm sorry, Peter."

"It healed at sunset. Can't permanently hurt the living dead. Damned unpleasant at the time, though." He stopped struggling against Breyfogle. "We can't beat magic. Jan, what can we possibly do?"

"All hands aft." The bull-necked man cracked his whip. In seconds, the entire crew — over forty men — stood in two long lines facing the poop deck. At the front of the poop deck, there were two doors and two stairways leading to the top.

The men swayed with the plunging of the ship. Spray cascaded over the bow and across the deck. Yet the sun shone brightly, and a few yards from the *Flying Dutchman*, the waves lapped languidly.

The music, such as it was, reached a crescendo. Slowly, with exaggerated dignity, Vandervecken stepped out a door, turned his back and ascended the stairs to the poop.

In spite of his own circumstances, Jan couldn't help examining Vandervecken with the eye of a professional historian. He wore a thick blue coat with short tails, broad bottomed trousers, and a hat the size of a pizza pan. He had a black eye patch and a wooden leg which thumped with each step, and a thick leather belt with several pistols thrust inside it, plus a cutlass, and a cat-of-nine-tails whip. A cliché pirate, Jan thought, but then he realized this was the original from which the cliché sprang.

Now on the poop deck, Vandervecken turned to face the crew and bellowed, "Bring forth the brides."

The door below the poop deck opened. Out came a man tugging a chain. At the other end of the chain, dragged like a dog by a leash, was Frieda.

"Frieda!" Jan shouted, running to her.

"Jan! You came for me at last." She wore a long dress cobbled together from a dozen different garments. Her face was pale, her hair rumpled and whipping in the wind. She'd lost weight. Her hands were chained in front of her. Behind her, also chained, stood Sarah.

The man jerked the chain, pulling Frieda face forward to the deck. Jan kicked him in the knee cap, then ripped the chain from his hands. Astonishingly, he did not resist, just stood staring as if thunderstruck. Jan helped Frieda up and gave her the hug of her life.

"Who dares touch a bride of Vandervecken?" Vandervecken roared. He leaned over the rail of the poop deck, the cat-of-nine-tails in his hand.

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"She's not your bride, she's *mine*," Jan shouted back.

"What? This is true?" Vandervecken looked at Frieda.

Frieda nodded.

"Ha. You told me you were a virgin."

Frieda shrugged. "You said you'd beat me if I weren't."

"The bride of Vandervecken must be a virgin! You?" He pointed to Sarah.

"Me? Hardly. I'm from Marin County," she said.

"You're plain out of luck, chum." Jan bent over to check the thick iron bands and the crude locks of Frieda's chains. Antique stuff, more rust than iron. One good strike with a hammer would shatter them.

"Look out!" Frieda screamed. A sudden blow on the back of the head nearly dazed him. Looking up, Jan saw Vandervecken grinning down at him. With an expert flick of the whip, Vandervecken made the balls at the end of each cat tail dance.

Jan grabbed at the whip. It flashed out of his reach, then caught him in the face, slashing his cheek wide open. Blood spurted down his neck and chest. Screaming, Jan ran to the steps and charged up. Vandervecken stood at the top of the stairs, grinning. The whip slashed open Jan's other cheek. When he threw up his hands to protect his face, the whip caught him full on the testicles. Shocked with pain, he instinctively lowered his hands. The next blow gouged out his eyes.

"Eggs or eyes," Vandervecken roared. "You can't hold them both."

Jan couldn't see. Blood spurted down his face. Now the cat slashed his temple. Dazed with pain, he stumbled, falling from the steps onto the main deck, landing on his left elbow. He heard the bone snap like a dry stick. Frieda screamed.

Now Vandervecken and someone else stood over him. Rough hands plucked away his clothes. Soon Jan lay naked on the splintered wooden deck. He could hear Vandervecken bellow with laughter and smell the stink of his own blood. Then Vandervecken started working with the cat. Jan lifted his good hand to save himself, but the cat flicked here and there, always catching him by surprise.

Blind, smothered in pain, at long last Jan lost consciousness.

He came to on a bunk deep inside the ship. The bunk heaved and lurched with every motion of the storm-bound *Flying Dutchman*.

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"Here. Drink this. It's not good, but it's hot." Peter held Jan's head in his lap and pressed a tin cup to his lips. Obediently, Jan gulped down the hot liquid, some kind of broth. It stank like rotten meat.

Hanging on a chain from the low roof, a lantern swayed back and forth, flinging fantastic shadows everywhere. A dozen other bunks lined the walls, each one with a sleeping man in it.

"I can see!" Jan said.

"Yes. Like I said before, the living dead heal at sunset. Whatever body you had when you came aboard is the one you have when you leave. If you ever do."

"Thank God."

"Maybe. The bad news is that Vandervecken will do the same thing to you tomorrow, and it will be all fresh and new."

"No. I can't possibly endure that again."

"You have to."

"I can't. I'll go mad. We have to get out of here."

"There doesn't seem to be a way other than breaking the original curse."

"And how do we do that?"

"We don't. Has to be a woman. If Vandervecken can find a woman who is true to him unto death, the curse will be lifted. Fat chance. They don't make women that stupid."

The ship's bell clanged.

"Got to go. You get some rest," Peter said. He rose, and in a second, he was gone.

When sleep finally came, Jan dreamed of the last act of Wagner's the *Flying Dutchman*. The over-rich, cloying music climbed to a crescendo as a young woman, madly in love with Vandervecken, filled the concert hall with a voice like a thing in pain. Pledging her troth, she committed suicide by diving into the ocean. Stage left, the fake waves swept back and forth, while a ship the size of a canoe sank beneath the floor.

Jan turned over and moaned. Something from that opera nagged at the corner of his mind. A line, maybe a bit of dialogue or a note in the program. Something important.

"Up, up, you lazy dog." Jan woke to find Breyfogle standing over him like a bearded mountain. He clapped his hands together to make a loud smack. "Take that, worthless sluggard." He slapped his hands twice more. "That'll

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teach you to be smart with me," he roared. Then, in a whisper, he said, "Better you start screaming now."

Jan screamed.

"Louder."

Jan screamed as loud as he could.

"Touch me, you dog! Let that be a lesson to you!" Breyfogle shouted. Then he whispered, "You've got to get up. Act hurt, or I'll be in trouble."

"Oh. Thank you. I'll be miserable. What's going on?"

"Vandervecken wants you on deck."

Involuntarily, Jan's muscles tightened. "I can't face that man."

"You must come. Or I must drag you, and I have no wish to hurt you. But I have even less wish to be hurt myself."

There was no choice. In seconds, Jan was up on deck, cold wind and spray licking at his face. Glancing at the horizon, he was astonished to see the old boat he had bought still floating nearby. He would have thought they would have sailed far beyond it during the night. But then, he realized, if this ship had been trying to round the cape for nearly 150 years, it couldn't be going anywhere fast.

"This time, with the cat, don't fight it," Breyfogle whispered. "Lie down, pull your knees to your chest, and cover your face. It will all heal tonight."

Breyfogle pushed Jan across the deck. The wind whipped his hair in his face.

Only then did Jan notice the squealing music. Vandervecken had all hands drawn up in lines just like the day before. Frieda and Sarah stood in chains. Vandervecken strode the poop deck, making the lead beads of his cat-of-nine-tails dance in the wind.

"Ah, ha, my friend. You need another lesson today?" Vandervecken cracked the whip.

Jan shrank back. His stomach rose; he felt like vomiting. He could not go through this again.

Breyfogle shoved him forward. Two other men grabbed his arms while others stripped him and lashed his wrists to the stair railings. Vandervecken, taking his time, humming a tune, came down the stairs. The whip flickered here, there, around Jan's body, anticipating but not touching.

"So where should my cat have its first taste, my friend?" Vandervecken said. The irritating tune he hummed ricocheted through Jan's mind like an errant cannonball. He'd heard it before.

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The cat cracked in the air.

The sound cleared Jan's mind. Now he remembered the tune. From the opera, of course. And now he remembered the line he'd been trying to recall last night.

"Don't touch me, Vandervecken," he shouted. "The curse is fulfilled. We are all free!"

Vandervecken only laughed. The whip slipped over Jan's shoulder, each lead bead like a sharp nail against his skin.

"First, you must find a woman true to me unto death. Do you see any such?" Vandervecken said.

"Yes! There's one in front of you. Frieda."

Vandervecken roared with laughter. "That one? She true to me? She fights like a tiger."

"No. That's not the condition of the curse. You must find a woman true unto death. Nothing about true to *you*. But she was true to me. She died taking the arrow intended for me!"

Instantly, the entire crew hushed. Vandervecken stood, his mouth open, the whip swinging in the wind. Then suddenly the storm stopped, the *Flying Dutchman* halting in mid-plunge so abruptly it tossed everyone sprawling to the deck.

"The curse is broken!" Peter shouted, leaping to his feet. He opened a clasp knife and sawed away at the ropes binding Jan. Meanwhile, the crew staggered like drunks, trying to regain their land legs after centuries of perpetual storm at sea. Voices chattered in Dutch and English.

Jan's ropes broke away. "Let's get Frieda and Sarah and get the hell out of here," he said to Peter, running to where the women stood. He gave Frieda a quick hug, then tugged uselessly at her chains. Why hadn't he thought to bring some tools?

"Here is what you need," said the sailor behind him. He produced an enormous antique key and unlocked the chains. Frieda and Sarah stood rubbing their wrists, trying to restore their hands' circulation.

"The ship is sinking!" someone yelled. Immediately a dozen other voices took up the cry. Jan looked around. Now that the curse had gone, the *Flying Dutchman* had become just another old ship badly in need of maintenance. As an historian, he would have loved to save it for a museum, but at the moment that didn't seem to be an option.

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"Make for that boat over there," he shouted to the helmsman, pointing to his own craft in the distance. Obediently the helmsman put the wheel about, and the *Flying Dutchman* heeled.

"No! I will not have it!" Vandervecken waved two long-barreled pistols at Jan. "The first man to desert this ship dies." He stepped to the railing of the poop deck, trying to cover everyone with his pistols.

The crew stood transfixed. Instantly, Jan realized what had happened. It wasn't really the pistols that frightened them. It was Vandervecken himself. Years of instant obedience could not be erased in an afternoon. He had to break that spell. He looked around for something to distract the crew's attention, even for a second.

The albatross. Sunlight gleaming from its long, snowy wings, it soared overhead, a mere arm's length from the main mast, blessing the ship and all its crew.

"Look. Up there! The albatross," Jan shouted. "The bird of good omen."

"He's right!" one man screamed, "it's a sign from heaven." The sailors shouted like children, singing, shouting, dancing with glee.

"Okay, we're out of here," Jan muttered to Frieda, who had already peeled out of her long skirts and was helping Sarah with hers.

"*No.* It is not a bird of good omen," Vandervecken shouted, his frustration obvious in his voice. "I'll show you what happens to those who defy me." He raised both pistols, taking careful aim.

"No! Don't shoot the albatross!" Jan shouted.

Two spurts of smoke burst from the pistols, followed by twin thunderclaps. The albatross fell to the poop deck with a sickening thud, feathers fluttering down after it.

Vandervecken picked up the fallen body, then made the wings flap in a grotesque parody of flight.

"Now we're in for it," Jan said.

"What do you mean? It's just a bird," Peter said.

"No, it's the embodiment of luck, and Vandervecken killed it. Just like the Ancient Mariner."

Laughing heartily, Vandervecken draped the dead albatross around his neck like a feathery scarf.

"That does it!" Jan shouted, his voice cracking with sudden fear. "Abandon ship! Everyone overboard now!"

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Jan helped Frieda, then Sarah, then Peter over the railing and into the sea. Then he straddled the railing himself, hesitating just a second as he looked down at the frigid water sweeping along under him. Vandervecken pulled out another pistol.

Jan leaped. He cleared the ship's side and plunged into the clear gray-green Antarctic water. Freezing, he swam with clumsy but determined strokes.

He was only dimly aware that others were swimming as well. When he at last reached his boat, his hands were so cold he could merely scratch helplessly at the side.

A bearded face looked down at him. "Ha. Much bedder now you not drown," said the sailor. The man grabbed Jan's arm and pulled him over the gunwale.

For a few seconds, Jan huddled with the others at the bottom of the boat. Frieda. Sarah. Peter. He hugged them all, grasping their hands, pulling them closer to his heart. The boat was packed with sailors, with Breyfogle already bellowing orders to get the rigging unsnarled and the sail up.

"So why the last-second panic?" Peter asked. "The curse is broken. He couldn't do much."

Jan shuddered, and not from the cold. "One curse is broken. But what about shooting the albatross? Didn't you ever read Coleridge?"

He pulled himself up to look over the side. Everywhere there was movement. Waves sparkled in the breeze, seagulls fluttered around the mast, clouds raced by high overhead.

In all this animation, only the *Flying Dutchman* remained motionless, sitting utterly and unnaturally still...as idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

GIRLS JUST WANNA...BOLDLY GO

LISTEN, I'LL admit this right up front (and please, no hate mail), I have never been a Trekker. It's not that I loathe the Star Trek franchise, it's just that it never sparked my interest. And one of the several reasons I can point to is that Starfleet women have always seemed so boringly undeveloped and underutilized.

Admittedly, with each new spinoff series, women's roles expanded...somewhat. (We *have* come a long way since the just-along-for-the-ride tokenism of Nichelle Nichols's Uhura.) Still, as I watched the big-screen, captain-heavy event of *Star Trek: Generations* last fall, I was again struck by how utterly unimportant all — with the possible exception of movie-star Whoopi Goldberg's cameo as Guinan — the female characters were to the story.

I'm not trying to single out the Star Trek media family for the charge of sexism. (*Star Trek: Generations* compares favorably to, for example, the other SF movie hit from last year, *Stargate*.) I'm merely explaining how, as a non-Trekker, I was nonetheless eagerly anticipatory of the January launch of the newest series, *Star Trek: Voyager*, as the flagship of the fledgling (and otherwise, unwatchable) United Paramount Network.

Finally, a woman (Kate Mulgrew as Kathryn Janeway) was to take the captain's seat as series lead. And other women, notably Roxann Biggs-Dawson as a half-Klingon/half-human chief engineer named B'Elanna Torres, looked like they had a shot at key supporting roles. Oh, there was to be plenty of testosterone on the flight deck, but women were finally going to be front and center, in the middle of the action, even controlling the action.

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It was almost too good to be true. Literally. During pre-production, many fans were less than thrilled at the prospects of a woman at the helm. And they voiced their unhappiness. Even the execs at UPN, it is said, got frosty toes at the idea that they might be blowing a sure thing, the interest of *Star Trek*'s key demographic group, males between the ages of 18 and 49. Luckily, the creators of the show didn't cave, even after a false-start casting choice of the waif-like Genevieve Bujold as captain. (I like Bujold. But what *could* they have been thinking of?)

Mulgrew, on the other hand, didn't disappoint. (Not *me*, anyway.) When I watched the pilot movie, I was impressed by her calm authority and compassionate gaze. And although *Voyager* has not become a religion to me, I've enjoyed the episodes I've watched, and would cheerfully watch a big-screen movie about this multi-cultural cast of characters.

It has certainly been interesting to listen to and read reaction to this show, however. Some has been gender-specific and decidedly unkind. Even on an all-female panel I participated in last February, which discussed the roles of women in SF film, one woman was especially dismissive of Mulgrew's captain. "Prissy schoolmarm" was, if I recall correctly, her description of Janeway.

Although I didn't agree, I saw her point. That Kate Hepburn riff that Mulgrew gets into is not at all like the masculine model of authority we're all used to. And what model of female authority exists to us? Schoolmarm is one. Mom is the other. And there is precious little else. That is part of the problem. And that is why *Voyager* could actually be part of the solution. If the producers, writers, directors, and performers are able to convince us that Captain Janeway is truly a non-macho, female-affirming figure of authority, she can be an important "role model" in our popular culture.

But role-model, schmole-model, moviegoers want entertainment, not an education, when they go to a flick. I know that. Heck, I even agree with it. But what makes me sad is that when we close our minds to women as primary heroes in science fiction (or any other kind of) film, we severely limit the possibilities for fresh, exciting story-telling.

Television, as *Voyager* illustrates, has — reluctantly or not — always been a more woman-friendly medium. Theatrical release movies are another matter. Not only are (mostly male) studio execs much more likely to green-light a male-

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centered movie, box office stats (especially for action and adventure films) have shown them to be wise to ignore us gals.

Women and girls will, after all, go to a movie about men. But, alas, most men and boys will not (willingly) go to a film that focuses on a woman. That's a dirty rotten shame, and (in the case of the two movies I'm about to recommend to you) a waste of one raucously entertaining flick and another absolutely enchanting film.

Comic book heroes have generally had good luck in their transition to the big screen. In recent memory, Superman and Batman lead the way with repeat blockbusters. And last year's smash for the smokin' Jim Carrey, *The Mask* (and the even more surprising success of *The Crow*'s dark vision) showed that even less famous, more contemporary cartoon heroes can hit it big at the box office.

At least if they're of the male persuasion.

The Hollywood hype machine barely took notice of *Tank Girl*, this past spring. I didn't see posters and ad trailers everywhere I went. And Lori Petty, who played the post-apocalyptic anarchist hero, was not interviewed by Barbara Walters. Worst of all, there were no Happy Meal action-figures, and no Whopper tie-in soda cups.

The box office was, not surprisingly, negligible. I saw the movie with about five other people, and was horrified when *Tank Girl* was beaten out, on its do-or-die first weekend, by the likes of Chris Farley as *Tommy Boy*. (What *is* this world coming to?)

Did the film deserve to do as badly as it did? I don't think so. True, it was a largely episodic struggle of our hero, Tank Girl, against a maniacal villain played by (shades of *Star Trek: Generations*) Malcolm McDowell, but that's what most comics-turned-movies are.

"Episodic" doesn't even begin to describe the original *Tank Girl* comic, created in 1988 by Jamie Hewlett and Alan Martin. Teddi Sarafian's screen adaptation actually gives quite a bit of narrative structure to the British duo's frenetically riotous (not to mention randily ferocious) panels.

In an earth dried to desert, a military bureaucracy called Water and Power, led by McDowell's Kesslee, controls life-giving liquids, and thereby, humanity. All except for Tank Girl, and like-minded rebels. Our hero should have come from New Hampshire, for she surely believes in the motto "Live Free or Die." She doesn't obey the fashion police, or any other controlling force. She dresses like a bag lady on LSD. She enjoys weeds, wine (okay, she

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actually prefers beer), and a little wooky-wooky when she can get it.

She is a wild-child with a distinctly punk edge. And if her joyous, chaotic pursuit of her appetites is a problem for the powers that be, well, hell, she's more than willing to live hard, fight dirty, and die young, if that's what it takes to be a free woman while she's around.

Clearly, this young woman is not the kind of wholesome hero most parents — especially of preferably docile daughters — want their kiddies to emulate. (This, as much as anything, explains the lack of fast food tie-ins. Why sponsor a figure who, in the words of the original comic, is "bald, smelly, and snogs kangaroos," when you can print the likeness of a pretty-pretty, goody-goody Indian princess like Pocahontas on the side of your Coke?)

Nor does Tank Girl fit into the American mold for comic hero. She is no milquetoast turned dapper demon, like The Mask. (T.G. was always delightfully demonic.) She has nothing approaching the superpowers of good ole Superman. (She can't fly, although she is bodacious enough to hang ten from the gun of her beloved tank.) She doesn't even have the wealth and social standing of a Bruce Wayne/Batman. (Instead of Boy Wonders and dapper manservants, Tank Girl hangs with a mechanic/pilot called Jet Girl (Naomi Watts), and a blood-thirsty band of kangamen called Rippers.)

She wasn't what we expected from a cinematic comic book lead, and so viewers wanted nothing to do with her. Their loss.

I am not trying to tell you that *Tank Girl* is a great movie. (But then, neither was *The Mask* or *The Crow*.) There are times, watching it, when you wonder if someone didn't do a bit of over-enthusiastic editing — that is, censoring. Petty's boisterous verve is great, but she is not quite the riot girl she should have been — and was clearly capable of playing.

Tank Girl's active sex life — toned way down for the movie — is a key example of this. Perhaps this is because of the bestiality angle of her amour with a mutant critter named Booga. (That reticence might also explain why Stan Winston's exceedingly homely Ripper designs, including Booga, have none of the rakish charm of Jamie Hewlett's drawings.)

Was cartoonish bestiality too hot for Hollywood to handle? Probably. In any case, the end result is that Tank Girl's lusty approach to life is a little more tastefully depicted than seemed absolutely necessary. (After all, the film had already pulled an R rating, so what were they worried about?)

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And as much as I enjoyed Lori Petty's performance, after seeing the brash animation bits (designed by Mike Smith of Colossal Pictures) that highlight the credits and several scene transitions, I sometimes wished that the entire story had been shot as an animated feature.

Having admitted that a completely different movie might have worked better, I have to add that I thoroughly enjoyed *Tank Girl* exactly as it was. The Busby Berkeley style rendition of "Let's Do It" at a 21st century brothel was alone worth the price of admission. And, as I've indicated, Petty was a delight. While Mr. McDowell has had the part of the hellish fiend down cold since his days as the boyish Alex in *A Clockwork Orange*.

And director Rachel Talalay obviously put her heart into this project. She started out as a producer for the king of the perversely tacky, John Waters, and then went on to direct *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* and *Ghost in the Machine*. She therefore has some familiarity with the fantastical, the futuristic, and the cheerfully bizarre. And, with a little help from a strong backbeat (provided by a rock soundtrack supervised by Hole's Courtney Love), Talalay put her divers experience to good use in her latest high-energy action fantasy.

Tis a real pity no one saw it.

Few moviegoers got to see *The Secret of Roan Inish*, either. Although it's probably not because they stayed away in droves from the theaters playing it. Rather, they probably never saw it on one of their local marquees. *Roan Inish*, from progressive, independent filmmaker John Sayles, didn't exactly get wide distribution. And yet, at several of those few theaters that showed it, it played for months. It was a film with great potential as a small, word-of-mouth, art house hit. If it had only been given the chance to completely live up to that potential.

I'm sure that Mr. Sayles didn't expect a box-office smash. He has been making good movies (like *Matewan*, *Eight Men Out*, *City of Hope*, and *Passion Fish*) for fifteen years, and hasn't had a hit yet. He even made a low-budget SF film called *Brother From Another Planet* (1984), which featured what should have been a star-making performance by Joe Morton as a silent, runaway slave from space. Its potent, often comical, commentary on racial identity and race relations made it much more than your standard stranger-in-a-strange-land alien story. And it remains one of my favorite modern science fiction films.

But there is little in the way of overt social commentary in Mr.

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Sayles's new film, *The Secret of Roan Inish*. And it doesn't really qualify as science fiction, either. Instead, it is a sweet, unpretentious fantasy, spun out of celtic folklore, adapted by Sayles from a children's novel of 1957 by Rosalie K. Fry entitled *Secret of the Ron Mor Skerry*.

Central to the post-WWII story is a ten year-old lass named Fiona (Jeni Courtney), who has been sent to live with her grandparents on the coast of Ireland. A few years earlier, the entire Conneely clan had been evacuated from the tiny isle, Roan Inish (Seal Island), they had called home for generations.

It had been a hard leavetaking for this fishing family, not the least for the tragedy tied to the event. An infant boy of the clan, Jamie, had been left on the shore while the family packed their boats, and the baby had washed out to sea in his cradle and been lost forever.

Or, not.

Watchful Fiona begins to question Jamie's dire fate as she explores the ancestral isle. And the gulls and seals who rule the rocky shore seem more than a little interested in her investigations. Fiona is guided by this natural world and by her human family. She listens intently as her grandfather (Mick Lally), grandmother (Eileen Colgan), young cousin, Eamon (Richard Sheridan) and eccentric older cousin, Tadhg (John Lynch) tell stories of the family's colorful history.

Sayles has melded myth into the fabric of everyday life. And in the process, he's created an entrancing movie that is firmly based, not in the fast-cut action narrative American audiences have become accustomed to, but in the age-old oral tradition of story-telling. Sounds like a snooze. But I assure you that it is not.

How could it be, when the stories are so fascinating? From fey Tadhg, Fiona learns the details of her ancestor, Nuala (Susan Lynch), who was believed to be a selkie (a shape-shifting seal who could take the form of a woman). With this knowledge, and the understanding that little Jamie had been one of the "dark ones" (genetic throwbacks to the selkie bloodline), little Fiona begins to hope that she'll be able to spin a new happy ending to the Conneelys' sorrowful tale of loss.

There are many reasons to fall in love with *The Secret of Roan Inish*. Fantasy has seldom been rendered with such naturalism, or such believable beauty, thanks to Sayles' assured direction and Haskell Wexler's gorgeous cinematography. Lesson: Good filmmakers doesn't need to morph anything to leave their audience believing in magic.

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And, with apologies to Kathryn Janeway and Tank Girl, you don't have to wear a captain's accoutrement or blast away with a big gun to have an adventure, or to valiantly act upon your world in a way that benefits yourself and others. Little Jeni Courtney, in her captivating screen debut as Fiona, shows us that even a quiet little wisp of girl is capable of great things if she has an open mind and a brave heart.

Yes, like men, women want to do great things and have exciting adventures. (If only in a darkened theater.) And, like boys, girls just want to boldly go. Looks like we might be willing to watch female science fiction/fantasy heroism on the box at home, but we're still waiting for that breakthrough at the box office.

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Ray Bradbury's story in our April issue, "Another Fine Mess," received a large and positive response. He returns to F&SF with a dark story, one best read in the safety and warmth of the summer sun.

Dorian in Excelsis

By Ray Bradbury

OOD EVENING. WELCOME. I see you have my invitation in your hands. Decided to be brave, did you? Fine. Here we are. Grab onto this."

The tall handsome stranger with the heavenly eyes and the impossibly blond hair handed me a wine glass.

"Clean your palate," he said.

I took the glass and read the label on the bottle he held in his left hand. Bordeaux, it read. St. Emillion.

"Go on, said my host. "It's not poison. May I sit? And might you *drink*?"

"I might." I sipped, shut my eyes, and smiled. "You're a connoisseur. This is the best I've had in years. But, why this wine and why the invitation? What am I doing here at GRAY'S ANATOMY Bar and Grille?"

"I," my host sat and filled his own glass, "am doing a favor to myself. This is a great night, perhaps for both of us. Greater than Christmas or Halloween." His lizard tongue darted into his wine to vanish back into his contentment. "We celebrate my being honored, at last becoming — "

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He exhaled it all out:

"Becoming," he said, "a friend to Dorian! Dorian's friend. *Me*!"

"Ah," I laughed. "That explains the name of this place, then? Does Dorian own GRAY'S ANATOMY?"

"More! Inspire and rule over it. And deservedly so."

"You make it sound as if being a friend to Dorian is the most important thing in the world."

"No! In *life*! In all of life." He rocked back and forth, drunk not from the wine but some inner joy. "Guess."

"At what?"

"How *old* I am!"

"You look to be twenty-nine at the most."

"Twenty-nine. What a lovely sound. Not thirty, forty, or fifty, but — "

I said, "I hope you're not going to ask what sign I was born under. I usually leave when people ask that. I was born on the cusp, August, 1920." I pretended to half-rise. He pressed a gentle hand to my lapel.

"No, no, dear boy — you don't understand. Look here. And here." He touched under his eyes and then around his neck. "Look for wrinkles."

"But, you have none," I said.

"How observant. None. And that is why I have become this very night a fresh new stunningly handsome FRIEND TO DORIAN."

"I still don't see the connection."

"Look at the backs of my hands." He showed his wrists. "No liver spots. I am *not* turning to rust. I repeat the question, how old am I?"

I swirled the wine in my glass and studied his reflection in the swirl.

"Sixty?" I guessed. "Seventy?"

"Good God!" He fell back in his chair astonished. "How did you *know*?"

"Word association. You've been rattling on about Dorian. I know my Oscar Wilde, I know my Dorian Gray, which means you, sir, have a portrait of yourself stashed in an attic aging while you yourself, drinking old wine, stay young."

"No, no." The handsome stranger leaned forward. "Not *stayed* young. *Became* young. I was old, very old, and it took a year, but the clock went back and after a year of playing at it, I *achieved* what I set out for."

"Twenty-nine was your target?"

"How clever you are!"

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"And once you became twenty-nine you were fully elected as — "

"A friend to Dorian! Bullseye! But there is *no* portrait, no attic, no *staying* young. It's *becoming* young again's the ticket."

"I'm still puzzled!"

"Child of my heart, you might possibly be another Friend. Come along. Before the greatest revelation, let me show you the far end of the room and some doors."

He seized my hand. "Bring your wine. You'll need it!" He hustled me along through the tables in a swiftly filling room of mostly middle-aged and some fairly young men, and a few smoke-exhaling ladies. I jogged along, staring back at the EXIT as if my future life were there.

Before us stood a golden door.

"And behind the door?" I asked.

"What always lies behind *any* golden door?" my host responded. "*Touch.*"

I reached out to print the door with my thumb.

"What do you feel?" my host inquired.

"Youngness, youth, beauty." I touched again. "All the springtimes that ever were or ever will be."

"Jeez, the man's a poet. Push."

We pushed and the golden door swung soundlessly wide.

"Is this where Dorian is?"

"No, no, only his students, his disciples, his *almost* Friends. Feast your eyes."

I did as I was told and saw at the longest bar in the world, a line of men, a *lineage* of young men, reflecting and re-reflecting each other as in a fabled mirror maze, that illusion seen where mirrors face each other and you find yourself repeated to infinity, large, small, very small, smallest, GONE! The young men were all staring down the long bar at us and then, as if unable to pull their gaze away, at themselves. You could almost hear their cries of appreciation. And with each cry, they grew younger and younger and more splendid and more beautiful...

I gazed upon a tapestry of beauty, a golden phalanx freshly out of the Elysian Fields and hills. The gates of mythology swung wide and Apollo and his demi-Apollos glided forth, each more beautiful than the last.

I must have gasped. I heard my host inhale as if he drank my wine.

"Yes, *aren't* they," he said.

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"Come," whispered my new friend. "Run the gauntlet. Don't linger, you may find tiger-tears on your sleeve and blood rising. *Now.*"

And he glided, he undulated, me along on his soundless tuxedo slippers, his fingers a pale touch on my elbow, his breath a flower scent too near. I heard myself say:

"It's been written that H. G. Wells attracted women with his breath, which smelled of honey. Then I learned that such breath comes with illness."

"How clever. Do *I* smell of hospitals and medicines?"

"I didn't mean — "

"Quickly. You're rare meat in the zoo. Hup, two three!"

"Hold on," I said, breathless not from walking fast but perceiving quickly. "This man, and the next, and the one after *that* — "

"Yes?!"

"My God," I said, "they're almost all the *same, look*-alikes!"

"Bullseye, *half*-true! And the next and the next after that, as far behind as we have gone, as far ahead as we might go. All twenty-nine years old, all golden tan, all six feet tall, white of teeth, bright of eye. Each different but beautiful, like *me*!"

I glanced at him and saw what I saw around me. Similar but different beauties. So much youngness I was stunned.

"Isn't it time you told me your name?"

"Dorian."

"But you said you were his *Friend.*"

"I *am. They* are. But we all share his name. This chap here. And the next. Oh, once we had commoner names. Smith and Jones. Harry and Phil. Jimmy and Jake. But then we signed up to become Friends."

"Is that why I was invited? To sign *up*?"

"I saw you in a bar across town a year ago, made queries. A year later you look the proper age — "

"Proper — ?"

"Well, *aren't* you? Just leaving sixty-nine, arriving at seventy?"

"Well."

"My God! Are you *happy* being seventy?"

"It'll do."

"*Do*? Wouldn't you like to be *really* happy, steal some wild oats. *Sow* them?!"

"That time's over."

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"It's *not*. I asked and you came, curious."

"Curious about *what*?"

"This." He bared me his neck again and flexed his pale white wrists. "And all *those*!" He waved at the fine faces as we passed. "Dorian's sons. Don't you want to be gloriously wild and young like them?"

"How can I decide?"

"Lord, you've thought of it all night for years. Soon you could be *part* of this!"

We had reached the far end of the line of men with bronzed faces, white teeth and breath like H.G. Wells' scent of honey...

"Aren't you tempted?" he pursued. "Will you refuse — "

"Immortality?"

"No! To live the next twenty years, die at ninety and look twenty-nine in the damn tomb! In the mirror over there. What do you see?"

"An old goat among ten dozen fauns."

"Yes!"

"Where do I sign up?" I laughed.

"Do you accept?"

"No, I need more facts."

"Damn! Here's the *second* door. Get *in*!"

He swung wide a door, more golden than the first, shoved me, followed and slammed the door. I stared at darkness.

"What's this?" I whispered.

"Dorian's Gym, of course. If you work out here all year, hour by hour, day by day, you get younger."

"That's some gym," I observed, trying to adjust my eyes to the dim areas beyond where shadows tumbled, and voices rustled and whispered. "I've heard of gyms that help *keep*, not *make* you young.... Now tell me..."

"I read your mind. For every old man that became young in there at the bar, is there an attic portrait?"

"Well, *is* there?"

"No! There's only Dorian."

"A single person? Who grows old for *all* of you?"

"*Touché*! Behold his gym!"

I gazed off into a vast high arena where a hundred shadows stirred and moaned like a tide on a terrible shore.

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"I think it's time to leave," I said.

"Nonsense. Come. No one will see you. They're all...*busy*. I am Moses," said the sweet breath at my elbow. "And I hereby tell the Red Sea to *part*!"

And we moved along a path between two tides, each shadowed, each more terrifying with its gasps, its cries, its slippages of flesh, its slapping like waves, its repeated whispers for more, more, ah god, more!

I ran but my host grabbed on. "Look right, left, now *right* again!"

There must have been a hundred, two hundred animals, beasts, no, men wrestling, leaping, falling, rolling in darkness. It was a sea of flesh, undulant, a writhing of limbs on acres of tumbling mats, a glistening of skin, flashes of teeth where men climbed ropes, spun on leather horses, or flung themselves up crossbars to be seized down in the tidal flux of lamentations and muffled cries. I stared across an ocean of rising and falling shapes. My ears were scorched by their bestial moans.

"What, my God," I exclaimed, "does it all *mean*?"

"There. *See*."

And above the wild turbulence of flesh in a far wall was a great window, forty feet wide and ten feet tall, and behind that cold glass Something watching, savoring, alert, one vast stare.

And over all there was the suction of a great breath, a vast inhalation which pulled at the gymnasium air with a constant hungry and invisible need. As the shadows tumbled and writhed, this inhalation tugged at them and the raw air in my nostrils. Somewhere a huge vacuum machine sucked in darkness but did *not* exhale. There were long pauses as the shadows flailed and fell, and then another savoring inhalation. It swallowed breath. In, in, always in, devouring the sweaty air, hungering the passions.

And the shadows were pulled, *I* was pulled, toward that vast glass eye, that immense window behind which a shapeless Something stared to dine on gymnasium airs.

"Dorian?" I guessed.

"Come meet him."

"Yes, but," I watched the wild convulsive shadows. "What *are* they doing?"

"Go find out. Afraid? Cowards never live. So!"

He swung wide a third door and whether it was golden hot and alive I could not feel, for suddenly I lurched into a hothouse as the door slammed and was locked by my blond young friend. "*Ready*?"

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"Lord, I must go *home*!"

"Not until you meet," said my host, "*him*."

He pointed. At first I could see nothing. The lights were dim and the place, like the gymnasium, was mostly shadow. I smelled jungle greens. The air stirred on my face with sensuous strokes. I smelled papaya and mango and the wilted odor of orchids mixed with the salt smells of an unseen tide. But the tide was there with that immense inhaled breathing that rose and was quiet and began again.

"I see no one," I said.

"Let your eyes adjust. Wait."

I waited. I watched.

There were no chairs in the room, for there was no need of chairs.

He did not sit, he did not recline, he "prolonged" himself on the largest bed in history. The dimensions might easily have been fifteen feet by twenty. It reminded me of the apartment of a writer I once knew who had completely covered his room with mattresses so that women stumbled on the sill and fell flat out on the springs.

So it was with this nest, with Dorian, immense, a gelatinous skin, a vitreous shape, undulant within that nest.

And if Dorian was male or female I could not guess. This was a great pudding, an emperor jellyfish, a monstrous heap of sexual gelatin from the exterior of which, on occasion, noxious gases escaped with rubbery sounds; great lips sibulating. That and the sough of that labored pump, that constant inhalation, were the only sounds within the chamber as I stood, anxious, alarmed but at last impressed by this beached creature, cast up from a dark landfall. The thing was a gelatinous cripple, an octopus without limbs, an amphibian stranded, unable to undulate and seep back to an ocean sewer from which it had inched itself in monstrous waves and gusts of lungs and eruptions of corrupt gas until now it lay, featureless, with a mere x-ray ghost of legs, arms, wrists and hands with skeletal fingers. At last I could discern at the far end of this flesh peninsula what seemed a half-flat face with a frail phantom of skull beneath, an open fissure for an eye, a ravenous nostril, and a red wound which ripped wide to surprise me as a mouth.

And at last this thing, this Dorian, spoke.

Or whispered, or lisped.

And with each lisp, each sibulance, an odor of decay was expelled as from a vast night-swamp balloon, sunk on its side, lost in fetid water as its unsavory breath rinsed my cheeks. It expelled but one lingering syllable:

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Yesssss.

Yes *what*?

And then it added:

Soooo...

"How long...how long," I murmured, "has it...has *he* been *here*?"

"No one knows. When Victoria was Queen? When Booth emptied his makeup kit to load his pistol? When Napoleon yellow-stained the Moscow snows? Forever's not bad... What else?"

I swallowed hard. "Is...is he?"

"Dorian? Dorian of the attic? He of the Portrait? And somewhere along the line found portraits not enough? Oil, canvas, no depth. The world needed something that could soak in, sponge the midnight rains, breakfast and lunch on loss, depravity's guilt. Something to truly take in, drink, digest; a pustule, imperial intestine. A rheum aeshophagus for sin. A laboratory plate to take bacterial snows. Dorian."

The long archipelago of membranous skin flushed some buried tubes and valves and a semblance of laughter was throttled and drowned in the aqueous gels.

A slit widened to emit gas and the single word again:

Yessss...

"He's *welcoming* you!" My host smiled.

"I know, I know, I said, impatiently. "But why? I don't even *want* to be here. I'm ill. Why can't we go."

"Because," my host laughed. "You were *selected*."

"Selected?"

"We've had our *eye* on you."

"You mean you've watched, followed, spied on me? Christ, who gave you *permission*?"

"Temper, temper. Not everyone is picked."

"Who said I wanted to be picked!?"

"If you could *see* yourself as *we* see you, you'd know why."

I turned to stare at the vast mound of priapic gelatin in which faint creeks gleamed as the creature wept its lids wide in holes to let it stare. Then all its apertures sealed: the sabre-cut mouth, the slitted nostrils, the cold eyes gummed shut so that its skin was faceless. The sibulance pumped with gaseous suctions.

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Yessss it whispered.

Lisssst, it murmured.

"And list it *is*!" My host pulled forth a small computer pad which he tapped to screen my name, address and phone.

He glanced from the pad to reel off such items as wilted me.

"Single," he said.

"Married and *divorced*."

"*Now* single! No women in your life?"

"I'm walking wounded."

He tapped his pad. "Visiting strange bars."

"I hadn't noticed."

"Creative blindness. Getting to bed late. Sleeping all day. Drinking heavily three nights a week."

"Twice!"

"Going to the gym, look, *every day*. Workouts excessive. Prolonged steambaths, overlong massages? Sudden interest in sports. Endless basketball, soccer, tennis matches *every* night, and half the noons. *That's* hyperventilation!"

"*My* business!"

"And *ours*! You're balanced giddily on the rim. Shove all these facts in that one-armed bandit in your head, yank, and watch the lemons and ripe cherries spin. Yank!"

Jesus God. Yes! Bars. Drinks. Late nights. Gyms. Saunas. Masseurs. Basketball. Tennis. Soccer. Yank. Pull. *Spin*!

"Well?" my host searched my face, amused. "Three jackpot cherries in a row?"

I shuddered.

"Circumstance. No court would convict me."

"*This* court *elects* you. We tell palms to read ravenous groins. *Yes*?"

Gas steamed up from one shriveled aperture in the restless mound. *Yessss*.

They say that men in the grip of passion, blind to their own darkness, make love and run mad. Stunned by guilt, they find themselves beasts, having done the very thing they were warned *not* to do by church, town, parents, life. In explosive outrage they turn to the sinful lure. Seeing her as unholy provocateur, they kill. Women, in similar rages and guilts, overdose. Eve lies self-slain in the Garden. Adam hangs himself with the Snake as noose.

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But here was no passionate crime, no woman, no provocateur, only the great mound of siphoning breath and my blond host. And only words which riddled me with fusillades of arrows. Like an Orient hedgehog, bristled with shafts, my body exploded with No, No, No. *Echoed* and then real: *"No!"*

Yesssss whispered the vapor from the mounded tissue, the skeleton buried in ancient soups.

Yesss.

I gasped to see my games, steams, midnight bars, late dawn beds: a maniac sum.

I rounded dark corridors to confront a stranger, so pockmarked, creased and oiled by passion, so cobwebbed and smashed by drink, that I tried to avert my gaze. The terror gaped his mouth and reached for my hand. Stupidly, I reached to shake his and — rapped glass! A mirror. I stared deep into my own life. I had seen myself in shop windows, dim undersea men running in creeks. Mornings, shaving, I saw my mirrored health. But *this*! This troglodyte trapped in amber. Myself, snapshotted like ten dozen sexual acrobats! And who jammed this mirror at me? My beautiful host, and that corrupt flatulence beyond.

"You are selected," they whispered.

"I refuse!" I shrieked.

And whether I shrieked aloud or merely thought, a great furnace gaped. The oceanic mound erupted thunders of gaseous steams. My beautiful host fell back, stunned that their search beneath my skin, behind my mask had brought revulsion. Always when Dorian cried "Friend" raw gymnast teams had mobbed to catapult that armless legless featureless Sargasso Sea. Before they had smothered to drown in his miasma to arise, embrace and wrestle in the dark gymnasium, then run forth young to assault a world.

And I? What had I dared to do, that quaked that membranous sac into regurgitated whistlings and broken winds?

"Idiot!" cried my host, all teeth and fists. "Out! Out!"

"Out," I cried, spun to obey, and tripped.

I do not clearly know what happened as I fell. And if it was a swift reaction to the holocaust erupted like vile spit and vomit from that putrescent mound, I cannot say. I knew no lightning shock of murder, yet knew perhaps some summer heat flash of revenge. For *what*? I thought. What are you to Dorian or he to you that frees the hydra behind your face, or causes the slightest

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twitch of leg, arm, hand or fingernail as the last fetid air from Dorian burned my hair and stuffed my nostrils.

It was over in a second.

Something shoved me. Did my secret self, insulted, give that push? I was flung as if on wires, knocked to sprawl at Dorian.

He gave two terrible cries, one of warning, one of despair.

I was recovered so in landing I did not sink my hands deep in that poisonous yeast, into that multiflorid Man-of War jelly. I swear that I touched, raked, scarified him with only one thing: the smallest fingernail of my right hand.

My fingernail!

And so this Dorian was shot and foundered. And so the mammoth with screams collapsed. And so the nauseous balloon sank, fold on midnight fold, upon its own boneless self, fissuring volcanic sulphurs, immense rectal airs, outgassed whistles and whimpers of self-pitying despair.

"Christ! What have you *done*!? Murderer! Damn you!" cried my host, riven to stare at Dorian's exhaustions unto death.

He whirled to strike, but ran to reach the door and cry, "Lock this! *Lock*! Whatever happens, for God's sake don't *open*! Now!" The door slammed. I ran to lock it and turn.

Quietly, Dorian was falling away.

He sank down and down out of sight. Like a great membranous tent with its poles removed, he vanished into the floor, down flues and vents on all sides of his great platform nest. Vents obviously created for such a massive disease-sac melting into viral fluid and sewer gas. Even as I watched the last of the noxious clot was sucked into the vents and I stood abandoned in a room where but a few minutes before an unspeakable strata of discards and half born fetuses had lain sucking at sins, spoiled bones and souls to send forth beasts in semblance of beauty. That perverse royalty, that lunatic monarch, gone, all gone. A last choke and throttle from the sewer vent underlined its death.

My God, I thought, even now, that, all that, that terrible miasma, that stuff is on its way to the sea to wash in with bland tides to lie on clean shores where bathers come at dawn...

Even now...

I stood, eyes shut, waiting.

For what? There had to be a next thing, yes? It came.

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There was a trembling, shivering and then a quaking of the wall, but especially the golden door behind me.

I spun to see as well as hear.

I saw the door shaken, and then bombarded from the other side. Fists pummeled, struck, hammered. Voices cried out and screamed and then shrieked.

I felt a great mass ram the door to shiver, to slam it on its hinges.

I stared, fearful that the door might explode and let in the floodtide of nightmare ravening, terrified beasts, the kennel of dying things. For now their shrieks as they mauled and rattled to escape, to beg for mercy, were so terrible that I clamped my fists to my ears.

Dorian was gone, but they remained. Shrieks. Screams. Screams. Shrieks. An avalanche of limbs beyond the door struck and fell, yammering.

What must they look like now, I thought. All those bouquets.

All those beauties.

The police will come, I thought, soon. But...

No matter what...

I would not unlock that door.

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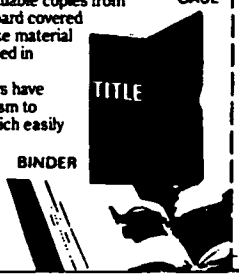

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Nebula Award winner Alan Brennert devotes much of his writing time to television. He has written several episodes for the revived Outer Limits *on Showtime, and has just sold the pilot for a new television series to Fox. The pilot,* Love is Strange, *combines science fiction, fantasy, and romance in...well...strange ways.*

Every now and then we can entice him away from scriptwriting to craft stories for us. "The Man Who Loved the Sea" is the second Brennert tale to appear in F&SF *in 1995; the first, "Cradle," was published in our January issue.*

The Man Who Loved the Sea

By Alan Brennert

IT'S A LONG HAUL FROM practically anywhere to Chincoteague: a barrier island off the eastern shore of Virginia, it's completely inaccessible by train, and the nearest major airports are hours away — in Baltimore, or Washington. I left Atlanta at eight A.M. Thursday morning, arrived in D.C. a little after ten, and was on the road by eleven: across the Chesapeake Bay Bridge, stop-and-go through a numbing procession of small dull towns, lunch a burger at Hardees, then back behind the wheel. The little Ford Escort weathered the journey better than I did: by the time I finally crossed Wallops Island into Chincoteague, I felt hot, tired, irritable — same as I'd felt twenty years before, when my parents, in the throes of the marriage spasms which would ultimately end in divorce, brought me here for my first summer with Uncle Evan and Aunt Dierdre.

But the minute I started across the Black Narrows Bridge — the moment I drew my first breath of the briny air, and saw my first great blue heron loping casually through the marshland below — my fatigue and irritation receded

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like a tide, and the memory of two glorious summers came back in a rush, etched brightly onto everything I saw.

I hadn't been here in almost five years, but in many ways the town didn't look all that different than it had even twenty years ago. There was still only one stoplight on Main Street, and the town dock remained sleepy to the point of narcolepsy. Gone were the neighborhood stores known only by their owners' names — Dave Birch's store; Charlie Gold's store — but the storefronts along Main were still small, mom-and-pop operations, not a single tri-level, escalatored shopping mall anywhere to be seen. Further south (or "down the marsh," as they said here) one-story bungalows with screened-in porches fronted the tidal flat; kids drove five-speeds across neatly mowed lawns; out on the channel, motorboats traced foam contrails in the water.

It was so much like the Chincoteague of my youth that for a moment I forgot what brought me here; for a moment, as I pulled into the driveway of the white clapboard house on Margarets Lane, I half-expected to see the tall, rangy figure of Uncle Evan ambling out of the house to greet me.

But it was Aunt Dierdre — heavy-set, middling height, white-haired — who appeared on the front steps as I pulled my travel bag from the trunk, and she was alone.

"Steven? You came — "

Though she didn't intend them to, the words cut deep: *You came.* For too long, I hadn't come. For the five years I'd been married to Rose, I'd been too busy with my own life — had only spoken to Dee and Evan by phone, the occasional holiday call. And now Evan was gone, and it was too late to make up for the lost time between us, to make amends for my thoughtlessness.

Maybe I could make amends to Dierdre, at least. As she approached, I dropped my travel bag and hugged her.

"How you holding up, Aunt Dee?"

I could read the pain in her eyes, but she shrugged in a way she shared with many residents of this fragile island: a stoic acceptance of the sort of calamities — floods, hurricanes, fires — which had always been part of life on Chincoteague. "Better," she said, trying for a smile, "now that you're here. But come on, come in, let me take that." Faster than the eye could follow she'd grabbed my travel bag and was bustling into the house — happy, I suspect, to have someone to look after again.

Both Aunt Dee and Uncle Evan were "Teaguers" — island natives. (Non-natives, even long-time residents who weren't born here, were invariably known as "come-heres" or "come-latelys.") My mother left Chincoteague for

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college and, after that, Baltimore, but her brother Evan stayed behind, becoming a "waterman" — a fisherman — and marrying his high school sweetheart, Dierdre. They were never able to have children of their own, which could account for why they so readily agreed to play host to a surly, restless ten-year-old city brat.

"You *were* a handful," she admitted, half an hour later, over cake and coffee. "But you settled down soon enough."

I smiled. "Yeah. But only after hijacking Uncle Evan's skiff." By the end of my first week on Chincoteague I'd contracted a near-terminal case of island fever; bored out of my mind, I liberated a small dinghy Evan had been restoring in his back yard, launched it (not without a skinned knee) into the channel, and tried — insane as it may sound, in retrospect — to paddle back to the mainland.

Dierdre laughed, eyes bright for the first time since I'd seen her. "When he found out what you'd done, I thought he was going to shellac your behind, but good. But when he caught up with you and saw you'd made it all the way to Willis Point, he told me, 'Dierdre, the boy may have the makin's of a waterman,' and after that, you could do no wrong, even when you did."

"Maybe I should have listened to him," I said. "There are days when trawling for flounder off Tom's Cove sounds a lot more appealing than putting out a trade magazine."

"Oh no," she said quickly, "it was hard work, Steven, a hard way to make a living. He loved it, but I think you *have* to love it, to keep at it, year in and year out."

I hesitated a moment. "Where...was he?" I said, finally broaching the subject we had so far avoided. "When it happened?"

Her eyes clouded over. "Right there," she said, nodding to the old leather recliner in the corner. "He'd had some angina, the month before, but we really had no idea. No warning." She looked down. "I know the Lord has His reasons, but...I must admit, I'm hard-pressed to see how He could need Evan more than I do."

I looked at the chair in which he'd spent his last moments, and felt an odd anger, a vague sense of...injustice. It must have showed on my face, because Dierdre just nodded sadly. "He should have been out there when it came," she said, glancing toward the waters of the bay. "It would've been awful for me — his boat being late; the search — but even so. He loved the water; loved the sea. That was where he should've passed on...not in some ratty old chair in his living room. Out there, in his element."

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I didn't want to go see him; didn't want it all to become real. But of course it was real, whether I wanted it to be or not. And so, too soon, we were in Salyers Funeral Home, and I was gazing down at Evan — at his creased, craggy face; at his big hands, calloused from years of dragging nets and shucking oysters; at his scarecrow-thin body laid out in a simple black suit — and my memories truly became memories, then. Until that moment, I could pretend that I could come back here...join him for an afternoon on his boat...go wading for clams with him. Now all that belonged irrevocably, and only, to the past.

The satin lining of the casket, the crushed velvet pillow on which his head lay — Evan would have snorted derisively at them. *A little too frou-frou for me*, he would've said — and it was then I remembered something he'd once told me. I turned to Aunt Dierdre. "Didn't Uncle Evan want to be cremated?" I asked. "His ashes scattered across the bay?"

Dierdre looked embarrassed; almost guilty. "I...I just couldn't, Steven," she said quietly. "It seems so...final. I want a place I can go to, to visit him. He was out there, on the water, for so much of our life together...I'd like him near me, now, for as long as I have left." She looked away. "Is that selfish of me?"

I shook my head, and didn't protest.

What would have happened, I wonder, if I had?

THE FUNERAL was scheduled for the next day. I made dinner reservations for seven o'clock at the Village Restaurant for Aunt Dee and myself; that left me with an hour or so of free time. Stiff and sore from the long drive, I decided to take a swim on Assateague, another barrier island — and wildlife refuge — due east of Chincoteague. Both islands are rife with tourists at the height of summer, but this was mid-September, and though the ocean was still warm, the beach was only sparsely populated, particularly this late in the day. I laid my towel and car keys on a sand dune, peeled off my T-shirt, and dove into the water — limbering up with a few kicks, then swimming parallel to the shore for about ten minutes before flipping over on my back and floating there in the waning sun.

As I floated, the sun a red mist beyond my shut eyelids, I felt the slow, languid pace of life here take hold again...my thoughts drifting back to the ways I used to pass the time, things I hadn't done in twenty years. 'Signing' for clams — poking a long, two-pronged stick into the tiny keyholes in the sand where innocent shellfish fell to my youthful appetite. Rashly trying to

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pet the wild ponies which ran free here on Assateague (and narrowly avoiding being kicked in the head by one particularly testy little foal). Bicycling through the refuge, learning to spot and name all manner of animals and birds unknown in the city: heron, ibis, deer, tree frogs, geese...

The water gently rocked me back and forth, tiny waves tickling the backs of my legs, elbows, neck. I was wearing a loose-fitting swimsuit; the water flowed through it, seeming almost to caress me with each rolling motion of the surf. I smiled, remembering the times I'd skinny-dipped here as a boy. I lay there, feeling happy and oddly aroused, the touch of the waters feeling almost like that of a human hand —

A hand which now, slowly and gently, began to...*stroke*...my genitals...

Startled, I yelped, kicked out of my floating position, tugged on the waistband of my shorts and peered inside, looking for...what?

Of course, there was nothing there. I laughed, embarrassed: Helluva riptide. And in fact the current had carried me, unknowing, about a dozen yards from shore. I paddled back to the beach, toweled off, and went back to Chincoteague for dinner.

The funeral was well-attended; the island, even now, is a tight-knit community, and Evan was particularly well-loved. A few of his fellow watermen spoke of their days together on the island, before the bridge was built connecting it to the mainland — back when boats were more than a livelihood, they were the life's blood of the community. His best friend, Ben Sanders, who owned the Channel Inn, said a few words. The minister read from Psalms. And that was about it.

We buried him in a small cemetery about a quarter-mile down Church Street, and I threw the first handful of dirt onto the coffin, saying good-bye to the uncle I had cared so much for — the uncle who, with his wife, had showed me that men and women *could* love each other, that people could make a safe place for themselves in the world. My marriage to Rose may have ended in divorce, but I took pride in the fact that it was a quick, amicable parting, nothing like the pitched battles my parents engaged in for so long; and I like to think I had Evan and Dierdre in part to thank for that.

When Aunt Dierdre asked me to stay the weekend, I agreed gladly — as much to assuage my guilt over my long absence as to comfort her. When she suggested I take Uncle Evan's boat, the *Sea Breeze*, out onto the channel, I was both surprised and flattered. She knew how much I loved the old tub, and knew as well that I had never piloted her without Evan at my side. I protested (not very strongly, I admit) that it had been at least six years since I'd been at

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the helm, but she dismissed that with a wave. "Your uncle thought you'd make a good waterman," she said. "That's good enough for me."

The *Sea Breeze* was an old trawler, white paint flaking from its cedar hull, green trim similarly chipping off oak railings. Its deck was scuffed, and mottled with thirty years' accretion of fish oils, but the moment I stepped into the small pilot house and took the wheel in my hands, I might as well have been at the helm of a luxury liner. The old diesel engine wheezed like an asthmatic at first, then settled into a steady (if somewhat tubercular) drone. I cast off, maneuvered the boat away from the town dock, and headed out into the channel.

The channel wasn't too crowded — one or two fishing boats, a half dozen speedboats: I glided past pilings and buoys, veered to port as I approached Chincoteague Point, then guided her slowly into the waters of Tom's Cove.

After about fifteen minutes I cut the engine and let her drift for a while, as I stood by the railing and gazed into the misty distance. Waves slapped gently against the creaking hull, lulling me into remembrance and reverie. I had it in mind, I suppose, that out here, on the water we both shared — the water he introduced me to — I would say my true good-bye to Uncle Evan; but it wasn't meant to be.

As I stood there, all fuzzy-headed and sentimental, I suddenly felt a huge jolt, the *Sea Breeze* shuddering beneath me. Rudely propelled out of my daydreaming, I noticed at once that the gentle rocking of the boat had ceased; it was essentially immobile. And that could only mean one thing. I hurried forward and looked out at what should have been the waters of the cove.

An oval of sand extended outward for a good ten yards ahead of the *Sea Breeze*'s bow.

Damn!

I felt mortified. Aground on a sandbar; Uncle Evan would never have allowed this to happen. I told myself that this happened to the best of sailors, particularly here in Chincoteague where sandbars appeared and disappeared like cards in a magician's deck; but I still hoped to hell that wherever Evan was, he couldn't see how his clumsy nephew, first time out of the box, had managed to beach his beloved *Sea Breeze* on a spit of sand.

Luckily I knew what to do. Well, no luck involved, actually — Evan had drummed it into me. I slipped off my sandals and climbed over the side of the boat, onto the sandbar.

Rather than immediately trying to push the boat off — the most common mistake you could make — I started to pace out the sandbar: that is, walk straight away from the boat in every direction until I began to hit deep water,

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so I knew in which direction to push the boat. I walked twenty paces south; there was a slow dropoff before I found myself up to my waist in water. I backed up, then went twenty feet to the west; a steeper dropoff this time. That might be the best bet. Still, to be sure, I headed twenty paces due east.

Only moments after my feet entered the water, I plummeted straight down. A *very* sheer dropoff.

I bobbed to the surface, started to swim the two feet back to the sandbar — but something stopped me. Almost as though I'd hit a wall, or a reef...yet there was nothing in front of me but water. I felt a brief surge of panic, then calmly turned in the water, figuring to swim around to the other side of the sandbar, the part I knew had a slow dropoff.

Something stopped me again.

But this time, it wasn't like a wall. It was like being held back.

Heart pounding, I looked down, terrified I might find a Great White circling below me...but there was nothing there.

Nothing...

That terrified me more than a shark would have. I flailed my arms, trying to move in any direction at all, but suddenly I could get no purchase at all on the water — couldn't move more than an inch or two in any direction.

Winded, I momentarily stopped treading water...and realized it made no difference whether my legs kicked or not. I was being...upheld, somehow. And the grip — there was no other word for it — seemed suddenly familiar. It was a gentle grip, firm but not cruel; in fact just the opposite. I could feel the water beneath me swirling and flowing around my legs, like fingers tracing spirals up my calves, my knees, my thighs. Beneath my cut-offs I was wearing only a swim support, and now the water seemed to press against my groin, caressing the bulge of my cock, making little tugs at the cotton fabric. The fingers of water ran up my stomach, teasingly, swirling and tugging at my chest hair, massaging my ribs, my pectorals, my shoulders...

My shoulders! I realized with a start that they were under water now. The hands, the water, whatever the hell it was, was *pulling me under*. I screamed for help, fighting wildly now against the force which was dragging me down, the water lapping at my chin, my lips —

I took a deep breath just moments before my head was dragged under the waves. What the hell was happening? Who *are* you, I wanted to scream, why are you doing this to me —

I opened my eyes. The salt stung them, but I saw nothing in front of me; nothing but water. My heart hammered in my chest. I knew I had only thirty,

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forty seconds before my air ran out; I had to *do* something. But what? How?

I kicked furiously, but remained rooted in place.

I felt something press against my lips. Cold. Wet. Strangely soft.

It was trying to force my mouth open. I resisted with all my strength, but it—whatever the hell *it* was—was stronger. And as my mouth began to open, I suddenly recognized what was pressed against my lips.

Another pair of lips...

I started to gag, reflexively fearing the intake of water into my lungs...but it never came. I tasted a salt kiss against my open mouth...but I could breathe. Almost as though I were somehow drawing the oxygen directly from the water itself.

As soon as I realized I was not going to die...as I understood that this force, whatever it was, did not mean to kill me, or even harm me...I relaxed a bit. And in that moment of relaxation, I could suddenly appreciate the pleasurable aspects of what was happening to me: the caresses to my body, the gentle eddies of water around my penis...and with my fear ebbing, I could even feel myself getting hard. My God, it was true: Given half a chance, men *would* fuck almost anything!

The thought made me laugh, and as my mouth opened further I felt a tongue of water gently dart inside. Salty and a little coarse, in some odd attempt at simulating human flesh, it licked at my own tongue, teased it...and I found myself reciprocating. The very perversity of what was happening began to arouse me. I wasn't going to die; I might as well enjoy whatever was happening. Tentatively my tongue explored these strange, liquid lips pressed against mine, cold and wet and somehow thrilling. They tasted of salt and brine and everything I loved about the sea. I was half aware of something inside my shorts, fingers of water gripping the shaft of my penis, moving easily from the base of the shaft to the tip, briefly stroking the foreskin, just long enough to bring me close to orgasm and then back down the shaft again, a gentle squeeze to my testicles, then up again, faster now, back and forth—

I came, and the ocean closed tight and warm around me, and the next thing I knew I was bobbing to the surface, free.

And alone. That much I knew at once.

With nothing holding me back any longer, I swam to the sandbar and lay there a good five minutes, trying to make sense of what had just happened—and failing miserably. It wasn't a delusion, that much I knew; but I could think of no rational explanation for the forces which had taken me (in every sense of the term!). After five minutes, I looked around me and saw that the

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sandbar had shrunk to half its size, and that the *Sea Breeze* was afloat once more. I took a deep breath and got to my feet.

I clambered back into the boat; its gentle rocking felt soothing, reassuring. I noticed the deck was wet; apparently, while I was gone, a large wave had dumped over the stern, spilling water and seaweed across the deck. It took me a moment before I realized there was something unusual about the seaweed.

Strands of the seaweed were arranged like letters on the oak planks. A strand that looked like a tuning fork was a *y*; a wobbly little circle was an *o*; half that same circle formed a *u*...

I shivered despite the heat, as I took in the entirety of the message which lay at my feet.

It said, *You taste like him.*

I GUIDED THE ship back to shore, tied her up at the dock, and got as far away from the water as I possibly could, retreating inland for lunch. I purposely didn't order a drink, as badly as I needed one, trying to keep my jumbled thoughts and emotions in some pathetic approximation of order. My whole world had turned upside down — in more ways than one.

I was terrified to go back out on the water. Afraid not for my life — whatever was out there could easily have killed me, had it desired — but of my own response to what had happened. Afraid of it happening again; afraid of *wanting* it to happen again. If the waters could assume the shapes they had, I wondered, what other forms could they take? Part of me wanted to know, and part of me never wanted to know.

But what really obsessed me was the message on the deck, and all that it implied. I didn't know how to answer the thousand questions that were boiling up in me. I wasn't about to tell anybody what had happened — wasn't about to even allude to it. And the questions I was beginning to ask about Uncle Evan were hardly ones I could put to Aunt Dierdre, even in veiled form.

There was only one person I could think to approach.

The Channel Inn, a quaint little bed-and-breakfast fronting Main Street, occupied a small but choice plot of land with a fine view of the channel and the marshes beyond. Still spry at seventy-two, Ben Sanders dragged over a white, wood-slatted chaise longue for me to sit in. "Whoops. Hold on," and before I could sit he whisked a rag across the back of the chaise. "Gulls," he spat out. "If I had a nickel for every bird turd I've cleared off these chairs...Iced tea?"

"Sure, thanks."

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He poured me a tall glass from an old-fashioned pitcher; handed it to me, then settled down in a chair opposite. "Ahh," he sighed, "I can't believe he's gone, can you?"

Ben and Evan had been best friends since they met in grade school, sixty years ago; they had played stickball together, wooed girls together, gone fishing together, for the better part of six decades. Now Ben squinted into the distance, toward the channel. "So," he said, "you took the *Sea Breeze* out for a spin today, did you?"

I said that I had.

He shook his head. "It was a fine boat in its time, don't get me wrong, but...you must admit, her engines have seen better days." I laughed. "Every Friday morning at eight A.M.," he went on, "Ev would pilot that rickety old scow past my bedroom window, 'cause he knew it drove me crazy. Not Tuesday mornings, not Wednesday mornings, not Sunday mornings. Friday mornings. Eight A.M. For *thirty years*. Ornery old son of a bitch."

He paused. It was quiet on the channel. Ben looked pained.

I waited a moment, then said, "He took the boat out a lot? Even after he'd retired?"

Ben nodded. "Six days out of seven. He may have stopped fishing for a living, but he just couldn't help himself. He'd go out, maybe catch a few pounds of bluefish, some black drum — give me some for my dining room, and Mrs. Brattle down at the Islander, and take home the rest."

"He fished every day?"

"Well, not every day, I reckon. Sometimes he'd just anchor her off Tom's Cove, or Assateague Beach, and spend the day out there, reading, watching the waves, whatever."

"She never says as much," I said, "but I think it might've been hard on Dierdre, having him away so much of the time."

Ben nodded. "I imagine it was. But he was an odd one, that Evan. Knew him fifty years — we played chess here every Thursday; went bowling every Saturday night; he and Dierdre came over for dinner every other Sunday. And for all that, there was still a part of him Evan kept to himself. Sometimes he'd look into the distance, and I didn't know *what* the hell he was seeing. I'd ask him, 'What's on that fevered little brain of yours, Ev?' and he'd just smile and say something like, 'Isn't the world an amazing place, Ben?' and I'd agree, yeah, the world could be pretty amazing, and that was it. I swear, that was all I'd get out of him. The man could be a goddamned conundrum, at times."

I tried to keep my tone measured. "Do you think he might have been...that is, there might have been someone — "

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Ben looked at me with suddenly wide eyes — and laughed. "A little something on the side, you mean?" he said, and laughed again. "Hell, I don't see how! Everyone's in each other's pockets on this island. Thing like that would get around." He paused, considering, then went on: "Truth to tell, there were days I wondered the same thing, but...he never left the damn island; I *know* it couldn't have been anyone *on* the island; and, most of all...I know he loved Dierdre. *Really* loved her. Old men don't stop talking about that kind of thing, Steve, just 'cause they're old. I know how much he cared for Dee."

He looked out onto the channel again; shook his head. "No," he said emphatically, "trust me. If Evan had any mistress, it was the sea."

That night I finally worked up the nerve to return to the ocean. The mosquitoes were fierce, but the beach, thankfully, was deserted; I stood a few feet away from the shoreline, watching the surf roll in, foam spilling up onto the sand and then receding again. I felt like a fool. Already the memory of what had happened seemed more and more like a dream, an illusion. But I had to follow it through.

I stood there a long moment, then called out, my voice muffled by the crashing waves.

"Who are you? What are you?" — although I thought I might already know.

The waves crashed to shore, oblivious to my presence. I felt even more like an idiot. But I tried again.

"What do you want from me?"

The waves rolled in. Foam washed over the sand, then receded...but this time, as the tide ebbed back into the sea, it left behind markings in the sand...furrows made as if by fingertips...letters. A word. A name.

Evan.

My body shook.

It was a minute before I could speak again. "He's...he's dead," I said finally. "You understand? He's gone."

The waves came crashing to shore, nothing unusual about that, but I shrank back nonetheless. When the water had retreated, it had left behind two more words.

Know this.

My throat was suddenly dry; hoarse. The only thing I could think to ask was, "Why?"

The waves came again, erased the message, and left a new one. Simple, and to the point.

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Loved him...

My breath caught in my throat. It was true. Everything I'd feared was true. Before I could say anything more — before I could think of what the hell *to* say — the waves had rolled in again, farther than before, swirling around my feet. I felt a light, gentle touch to my foot — not a caress, nothing sexual about it at all — more like a hand, a fingertip, touched in supplication.

When the surf receded, two words lay in the sand, a simple entreaty:

Bring back?

I turned and ran, not even waiting for the tide to erase the plea.

I'm not much of a drinker, but as my car headed up Main Street toward the Chincoteague Inn, I knew it was either stop for a drink or keep on driving — straight back to Atlanta. So, within minutes, I found myself on a barstool in the glass-windowed restaurant, looking out at the harbor — surprised to find, when I glanced at the tumbler in my hands, that I'd downed a seven-and-seven in something like three gulps. Even more surprised when I ordered another.

I guess it said something about me that the most difficult part of all this to accept was not the existence of something unnatural, almost unbelievable, out there in the waters off Assateague — an elemental? a water spirit? — but Uncle Evan's relationship with it. Well, hell, I'd read Joseph Campbell, but no book in the world could have prepared me for the idea that my beloved uncle could have been unfaithful to his wife. It would've been difficult to believe for anyone who'd ever watched the two of them together: even in their sixties, they would touch each other on the back of the hand, on the cheek, with unvarnished affection and understanding. The idea that he could kiss Aunt Dierdre good-bye in the morning, squeeze her hand fondly as he left for work, then go off for a perverted rendezvous with some...some *creature*...something not even *human*...it made me —

It made me furious. I hated him, just then: hated the lie he'd presented to Dee all those years, hated the cruel joke she didn't even know had been played on her, hated the image of him suspended in the water as I had been, in unnatural embrace with a preternatural lover. God *damn* him! How could he *do* this to her? How could he do this to *me*? Everything I believed about men and women, about caring for one another, about honesty and responsibility, I learned from Evan and Dierdre. Certainly not from my own parents. And now — and now —

My anger seemed to sober me up almost as quickly as the bourbon worked on me. I passed on a third drink, got up, and stood by the harbor side

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a long minute, taking in the air. Suddenly I hated the smell of the sea; hated the sound of the waves lapping against the dock; hated everything about it. I didn't care if I ever saw it again, once I left here.

Bring back?

I shivered and decided to walk the quarter of a mile back to Aunt Dierdre's. I let myself in — she was asleep, upstairs — and eventually I suppose I got to sleep myself, but it was the kind of jittery, superficial slumber in which you dream you're in bed, trying desperately to get to sleep, and you wake up at dawn feeling as though you've gotten no rest at all. The next morning at breakfast I drank three cups of coffee. I looked like hell.

"You look like hell," Aunt Dierdre said. I smiled. Nothing got past Aunt Dee.

Well — almost nothing. "Just a bad night's sleep," I lied. "Did you want to do some shopping today?"

"You go back to bed and get some rest. I'll take care of the shopping."

"I'm *fine*," I said. "Nothing a little coffee can't cure." And so, over her protests, we spent the next hour stocking up on canned goods and household supplies at Parks Market, then browsed the Corner Bookshop and Memory Lane Antiques before having lunch at Don's Seafood — one of the few restaurants on Main Street not directly on the water, much to my relief.

I wasn't very hungry, and my anger had cooled only a little. I felt awkward here with Aunt Dee, feeling somehow complicit in Evan's dirty little secret...if not worse: I had had relations with the same *thing* he had. I was more than complicit — I was just as bad as he was.

Dierdre may not have known my thoughts, but she sensed my mood. Quietly she said, "Thinking about Ev?"

Not in any way she could imagine. I nodded.

"Angry at him?" she asked. I looked up, startled.

"For leaving?" she said, and I thought that was as good a way as any to explain my sullen mood, and so I nodded: "Guess so," I lied again.

"Me too, a little," she admitted. "But, Steven...people who love each other always *will* hurt each other. You try not to, but it happens. No help for it. All you can do is forgive. God knows Ev wasn't a perfect husband — remember the time he and Ben went drinking in Franklin City and nearly wrecked the boat coming back? — but I forgave him that, as he forgave me not being a perfect wife. If we could do that, you can forgive him for leaving."

I thought about that. I thought about it a long while. We ate in silence a minute or two, and then I heard myself saying, "Aunt Dee...was it really

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important to Evan that he have his...his ashes...scattered at sea?"

Dee looked uncomfortable at the subject, and I was sorry to have brought it up again, but I had to know. "I think it was," she said. "But — "

I put a hand on hers. "It's okay," I said gently. "I'm not recriminating you. I just needed to know."

I dropped Aunt Dee at home, and without much pleasure at the prospect, drove back to Assateague and the beach. There were more people there now than last night, so I just stood at the shoreline watching the surf break in the distance, the steady, stately roll of the waves, rising and falling as they'd done for millennia — as they would for millennia to come — and I had an inkling, perhaps, of why Evan wanted to make this his resting place, this place of eternal life and motion, so much bigger and grander than any one human life. I even came to have an inkling, perhaps, of why he had done what else he had.

Loved him.

Yes. Yes, I did.

I could not quite believe what I was planning to do; it made me queasy just thinking about it. But I had no choice, really. If I felt any kind of debt to Evan — and what I'd gotten from him over the years far outweighed whatever anger I was still feeling — then I owed him this much. And perhaps, this way, I might even make some small amends for those five lost years; time I could never recover, and would always regret. That afternoon I deliberately parked my car a block down Margarets Lane, so when I slipped out of the house a little before one A.M., the ignition start wouldn't wake Aunt Dierdre. I drove through the deathly still streets of Chincoteague, coming — it seemed like hours, though it was only a matter of minutes — to the small cemetery on Church Street...

I parked along a deserted stretch of the street, got out and looked around — not without a certain dumbfoundment that I was here, that I was even considering this. The houses across the street were all dark; the only sound for miles was the trilling of a few nightbirds. I popped the trunk...took out the large garden shovel I'd hidden there earlier in the day...and set off, as stealthily as I could manage, through the empty cemetery. (It was pitch dark, yet I couldn't quite rid myself of the feeling that thousand-watt searchlights were following me all the way.) Finally, after several minutes, I came to the simple granite headstone marked

EVAN McCONNELL
Husband, Neighbor, Waterman

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I stood there a moment, drawing a deep breath, working up my nerve...then, with a sudden spasm of courage, dug the blade into the soft, newly turned ground. I lifted up a big chunk of earth; tossed it aside. I felt as though a threshold had been crossed. No turning back, now. They hadn't seeded the plot with grass just yet, there was no sod to replace; with luck, I would finish in an hour or two, replace the earth, and no one would ever know. Already I dreaded the moment when my blade would strike the metal lid of the coffin; I tried not to think about having to open it, having to reach inside, and about what I would find there. I concentrated on the shovel, on plunging it into the ground, then out, flinging earth to the side; again the blade goes down, another chunk of earth uprooted, and another, and —

"Steven?"

I dropped the shovel, reflexively. I suddenly had a pretty fair inkling of what cardiac arrest felt like.

I turned to discover, to my horror and embarrassment, Aunt Dierdre standing about five feet from the foot of the grave — the grave of her husband, the grave I was desecrating!

I wanted to die. My mouth was dry as sand; I seemed to have forgotten how to form words. "I — I — "

But there was no anger in her face — no surprise, even — just sadness. She took a step toward me and said, with unexpected gentleness, "It's all right. I know what you're trying to do. I know why."

I could only shake my head, helplessly. "No," I said. "No, you don't."

But she just smiled, softly and sadly. "I know more than you think," she said. "I know Evan loved the sea. He wasn't a very religious man, never went to church with me, but...there was something about the ocean that moved him, deep inside, ever since he was a boy."

Her gaze drifted to the east; toward the ocean. "If you love something that much, for that long," she said quietly, "eventually, I suppose...it loves you back ..."

I was stunned speechless a long moment.

"You...you knew?" I said, finally. "He told you?"

She shook her head.

"No," she said, "of course not. Evan would never have hurt me that way. But I could tell. When we were on the boat together...at the shore...the way the water *moved* when he was around it...I came to *feel* her, her presence, after a time. But I also knew that she was no threat to what Ev and I had together, so we...shared him, in a way."

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She looked down, ashamed. "I only got selfish after he died," she said. "Wanted him for myself." She looked up again. "I was wrong."

"No," I said, "you weren't — "

She nodded. "Yes, I was. I'm a good Christian, Steven. And I should've trusted in that." She glanced toward the soft susurrus of the ocean's voice, whispering in the distance.

"Let her have his body," she said. "I'll trust the Lord that when my time comes, his soul will be with me."

I stayed in Chincoteague another three days — long enough for the body to be exhumed and cremated. And on the morning of the third day, Aunt Dierdre and I got up a little before sunrise, drove to Assateague, and stood at the shore's edge, the horizon burnished gold and red, the wind light and dry from the south. Carefully I took the lid off the urn, and poured the first ashes into Dierdre's cupped hands; she looked at them a moment, lowered her lips to her hands, breathed a good-bye onto them, then held out her hands and let the wind take the ashes from her, fanning them across the glassy surface of the sea. I took the next handful, and let the wind take those as well; and within a minute, it was all over. Uncle Evan had returned to the sea.

I stayed with Dee the rest of the day, finally leaving around six P.M. to start the long drive back to Washington. As I drove down Main Street, something made me stop at the town dock for one last look at the *Sea Breeze*, rocking gently in its berth. I noticed from dockside that the deck was wet, although the waters in the harbor seemed calm. I jumped the railing and boarded the old trawler for what was very likely the last time. There was indeed water on the decks — and seaweed as well, strands arranged ever so carefully on the scuffed, oaken deck.

They read: *He loved you too.*

I went back to my car, and in moments I was crossing the Narrows Bridge, the waters of the channel black and bright below me, flowing back endlessly, eternally, to the bosom of the sea.

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A SCIENTIST'S NOTEBOOK

GREGORY BENFORD

SEX, GENDER, AND FANTASY

I DWELL in the universe of the university, where the humanists these days have a special set of definitions. Sometimes, even about the seemingly obvious.

Biology dictates that there are two sexes. Culture acting on biology, so the story goes, makes gender. Thus gender differences are "socially constructed," as the jargot — a combination of jargon and argot — has it.

I teach in the humanities core course for freshmen honors students each year, where such distinctions are crucial. Once I innocently asked how many genders there were, and the puzzled response was, well, two, of course. What about homosexuals? I asked. Don't they represent different persuasions, different cultural flavors? After culture operates on biology, why should there be a one-to-one mapping?

There followed an uncomfortable silence, in which it became clear that gender was just a code word for the latest academic cultural spin put on sex. Homosexuality was, well, not an issue. Was it biologically determined? Well, no. It was socially constructed, as were attitudes toward it. Then why was it persistent in human societies? No answer.

Much in the humanities has no answer, for the language is innocent of data. They lack the rub of the real.

Yet issues of sexuality, of that old question — what is natural? — remain. We're a highly charged, sexy species, and such matters mean much to us.

Will technology take us beyond these issues? This is a science fictional question. Can we ever achieve a total detachment of gender from sex? — that is, switch roles utterly? A total polymorphousness?

These are curiously analytical questions to ask of a subject so steeped in legend and shadowy emotions. Permit me, then, a digression into — as the humanists would say — rhetoric.

* * *

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To the American male the vagina has always been a dark land, moist and mysterious, controlled by rhythms he could not sense or slake. Beyond that often-obliging passage lay the vast, dusky domain of the uterus, where the magical act of bringing forth life occurred, buried deep. He had mere abstract knowledge of that strange cavern territory, a geography forever beyond touch. He could only hear it, with an ear pressed against a wife's belly, listening to the random thumps of babies on the way, swimming in night.

So as the American turned from the dying frontier of the west, having reached the Pacific and found its oceanic turmoil a salty vastness, he set out to find a new land. The sac that surrounds the embryo has the same saline content as the ocean — as does the blood that knocks in our veins — echoing the Pacific's patient emptiness. So we began our twencen frontier there: the inner ocean, dark and engulfing, enclosing each of us at our most vulnerable beginnings.

The new frontier was opened in the name of sanitation, the same impulse that brought forth indoor plumbing in the 1890s; a Pasteur-driven passion to cleanse the world and make it fresh and new again. So woman was cleaned up, like a problem in municipal maintenance.

Douches, baths, tubes you insert to suck up the dismaying flood, sprays, anti-itch powders, diaphragm, foams, pills — they all ran together as the decades raced through, one stopgap (quite literally) blending into the next as the distinction between hygiene and birth control blurred, and the old dark land yielded to invasions, thrusts deep into its territory, things that dried and sealed off and, after a first rough chill, became an accepted piece of that dimly lit landscape, a mild discomfort at best, an...appliance.

An old tobacconist's saying, about drawing a customer in, goes, Start with a pinch, end with a pound. So it was with the saline frontier. The urge was not merely one more land rape, but the desire to mechanize, to make rich cropland from the untamed, moist forest.

(Could the rigid rectangularity of the checkerboard midwest have a great deal to do with their sex lives? The furrow lines in fields draw you forward to the infinity where parallels meet, over the horizon. In the grip of such geometry, such mathematical order, the impatient, snaky pant and slither of sex doesn't fit. The American instinct, pinned to the Euclidean landscape, has been to mechanize their own reproduction, just as they did to wheat.)

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Agriculture isn't a hand-dominated industry anymore. Why do all that work? the ads say. Sure, they're talking about household chores, cleaners, toothpaste — but what's the most basic homemaking job a woman has? No mess, no fuss... So medicine makes sex safe and dry, far from the moist dark territory of the primordial mind.

But how?

The first step is basic: disconnect the groin from the id.

Ever since Freud, we've thrown up temporary barriers to the unconscious — the newly elected seat of all our dark, base drives. But anyone who has been through traditional analysis — or Jungian, or anything more trendy — knows how badly that works. (A recent study of psychotherapy techniques showed that patients had just as good a chance of improving if they skipped their Freudian-based therapy sessions entirely, and went for a walk.) So if you can't wrestle the id to the ground, and handcuff it securely, what next?

Disconnect! Assume that sex organs are accidents of birth. Assume that sexuality is carried in the genitalia like incidental freight, neatly packaged. Sure, there are nasty hormones in the blood. (Including that worst offender, testosterone, one of the aggressors; and we know what the United Nations thinks of them.) But those hormones are easily fixed — just tinker with the glands. Most of them are lodged in those dictatorial organs, the genitals. Outlying areas can be mopped up later.

So some feminists tell us that men and women are basically alike, except — in a coolly analytical phrase I lifted from a tract — except for the plumbing. (Recall the 1890s. Here lies the final victory of the flush toilet.)

It is tempting to see sex as a set of detachable appliances, fitted to the basic human body frame at birth. Then we can all believe that, way down deep, we're really the same unisex model.

E pluribus uninum. Chevy products are all the same car, you know — even though the add-ons and extras are deceptive, the real car has the identical engine, gears, axle. As with products, why not with people?

Social behavior can be endlessly altered, trimmed, sanitized, so this argument goes — if we'll just overlook the, uh, plumbing. The eternal edgy peace between men and women can then be smoothed over, and final treaties signed, if we apply a bit of operant conditioning — that ugly but useful phrase that comes from Skinner's neoPavlovian work.

* * *

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Seem too simple-minded? Orwellian? Something out of Brave New World?

Look at Heavy Metal's recurrent images: women coupling with things that are half-machine; androgyny rampant; high tech meets low lust. Nowhere is the American ambivalence about sexuality reflected better than in these images, saturated with the strange eroticism of the man-machine interface.

Or look to science fiction. The most interesting version of future sexuality to emerge in the 1970s was John Varley's quickchange utopia, in which people switch sexes whenever taste dictates. From *The Ophiuchi Hotline* through *Steel Beach*, he envisioned a society restless with change — indeed, alive with metamorphosis.

This ferment produces a remarkably laissez-faire society, in which family roles dissolve. All is optional. Varley assumes that there will be no more racism or sexism in such a world, because everyone will have the ability to be anything. When you can be the other, there soon is none.

The next, subtle yet crucial assumption is that, when you switch, you take no baggage with you. The details of the process are high tech indeed — you speed-grow a clone of yourself, have your brain transplanted — or just "map" the brain — and zap, you're reborn.

Is this plausible? More to the point, do Varley's assumptions set the stage for a fiction that can tell us something about the nature of sexuality and society? Does the brain flip-flop from male to female, on orders from the hormones?

We now know by direct experiment that men use one local part on one side of their brains to process sound. Women, on the other hand, use both sides in a more diffuse manner. This may explain why girls have greater early verbal fluency, while men's abilities grow steadily greater from a slow start.

Why did our evolution select this substantial difference? Seldom is a trait taken on for a single cause, especially in the complex warrens of our neural labyrinths, where abilities crosslink. We will probably never know why our specializations arose. But the plain differences between men and women stand out; we are moderately shaped for specialized tasks.

Men are better at high-power work, using motor muscles. Their sense of spatial arrangement is better and appears earlier. Women can sit longer, do delicate hand-eye work more adeptly, have better color perception. (Partial color blindness, such as I

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have, is carried by the female, though; one of evolution's little jokes.)

We differ. Nature wanted it that way. On average, with a considerable spread in individual abilities within each sex. Plenty of women in my neighborhood can outrun their mates.

So consider an opposite tide of thought about sex, one moored in the molecular architecture. Edward Wilson's *Sociobiology* (1975) sounded the trumpet for an enduring genetic program, seated far back in the brain, not lodged in the organs. Hardwired sexuality that could not be pried out.

Wilson's *On Human Nature* (1978) enraged people across the entire political/social spectrum. Anyone who believed in the high merit and ultimate perfectibility of humans was offended — from the gentle philosophical humanists, to the flinty-eyed, up-against-the-wall Stalinist-Marxists.

Wilson's point of view is simple, and comes from an essentially conservative notion: that much social behavior springs from genetic programming. Society itself — insect or human — is often a manifestation if genetic needs.

So are sexual roles. An example: Humans (and other primates) produce few children, and nurture them intensively. A female's reproductive potential is then limited by her ability to provide nurture. A male, though, can sire many more young than a single female can bear and raise. The more females he mates with, the greater his reproductive success — i.e., how many of the next generation carry his genes. Males then compete to fertilize females, investing little in each offspring.

On the other hand, the female's preferred strategy is to choose a male who will lend a hand in bringing up the kids. A well-respected study of western women by anthropologist Heather Fowler found that women associate two basic symbols with sexually attractive men: money and status. Such men can provide good nurturing background, steadiness, security — they're success symbols. Similarly, men notoriously go for women with unwrinkled skin (therefore younger, able to reproduce better), large breasts (better nurture?) and a "certain sexual receptivity" (promising a ready "conquest").

Do men and women think this through? No! They're wired for it, through pleasure. In most societies, sex is widely regarded as something men seek and women dispense. This attitude is so common across cultures that it cannot be an accident.

Still, it's a wise man who knows his own son — so cuckoldry is a rage-producing taboo. A man who dutifully rears children who do not, in

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fact, carry his genetic code never gets represented in the next generation. Universally, he is a fool.

It's not surprising that evolution has selected for males who have strong views on such matters. The prime reason for murders of women, by men, in both America and Africa, is suspected or actual infidelity. It's even an important cause of murder among gays. Its passions run deep.

Gays, in fact, represent one of the unexpected insights that a good scientific theory gives. The maladjustments many male gays have with their own sexual impulses represent something very deep — an abiding sense of frustration over the conflict between genetically driven patterns and what society wants us to do. The family, after all, is a rickety cage, restraining male promiscuity, husbanding (literally) resources, providing continuity to all. Society shores up family life in many ways, to build big, stable institutions based on the small, private virtues learned at home. This disguises some of our innate drives.

To see the naked patterns of sexual behavior, then, look to homosexual behavior. There, society's bonds are gone. Every study shows that gay males tend strongly toward one night stands. Lesbians are much more apt to pair-bond, forming long term relationships. The two divergent strategies laid bare.

Ironically, then, we can see our genetic heritage most clearly in the patterns of the homosexual outgroup. Doubly ironic, since this is the one group that passes on less of its genetic material than do the couples of suburbia.

Why, then, any homosexuality at all? The fashionable attitudes of our time hold that homosexuality is perfectly all right because it *is* a right, like free speech. The political language revolves around "sexual preference," trivializing a profound inner sense into a fashion choice. Who ever looked over the sexual opportunities, like shopping?

A more persuasive argument rests on biology itself. Homosexuality persists in all societies, and indeed, among the higher primates generally, because it has an evolutionary role.

Explaining why brought into play the idea of "kinship selection." The term itself came from studying why groups in the wild can manifest seemingly odd behaviors, ones not immediately useful in survival.

This means that a gay man or woman can work for the betterment of his or her relations, laboring in the tribe as specialized labor, free of the burden of child rearing. Gay males might have been leaders, or explor-

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ers, or craftsmen. They might have stayed close to the mothers, to protect while the other men were away. Lesbians could have done general service in child rearing, or helped hunt (women often have a better sense of smell). These are available, specialized labor, just as men and women adapted to special tasks.

These are "Just So"-style stories explaining why given traits emerged. The crucial point is that they did, in the crucible of rapid human evolution.

The genes which can occasionally confer homosexuality (in about one percent of the human population) are shared by kinfolk. Usually the slight genetic influence does not manifest itself as homosexuality, and so gets transmitted through ordinary heterosexual bonds.

But because the gay brother or sister labors on, the tribe as a whole has a better chance of surviving. Homosexuality need not be accepted because it is a right, but rather because it is indeed natural. It is preferred as a minority strategy by evolution of the hunter-gatherer hominids we once were...and still are.

The ancient past speaks to us, but we seldom hear. I live in a town with about 30% gay population. The mayor is gay, and a friend of mine. He has been selected for, far back in Africa.

I suppose whatever he does in the bedroom does not fit the antiseptic American ideal. He does far more outside it, for our community, than I, standard issue heterosexual male, will ever do.

He belongs here. He is natural. So are the two lesbians on the city council.

I held, back in that humanities class, that we could productively consider both homosexual modes as alternate social/biological strategies which demonstrably propagate themselves. They have their own cultures, intermingling with the subcultures of men-alone and women-alone. Perhaps, to make a distinction between the simple biological sexes and the cultural genders, we should speak of four genders. Four strategies.

So the evidence is in: there are deep currents in the human psyche, ingrained in the DNA, that drive human sexuality. We do not learn to be men and women solely from society. (Indeed, how could anybody who has passed through the hormonal roller coaster of adolescence possibly believe otherwise?)

Fast-changing society doesn't always like those deep drives. It does what it can, through conditioning, to shape them to its benefit.

The American impulse to mechanize its own sexuality has to be looked

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at this way. It seeks not just the victory of the vaginal deodorant tycoons; the Cause extends down to the soft-spoken socialists who dream of Perfectible Mankind, and to the feminists who long for the Good Male. Once we were devils, but we can become angels. Fine ideals, perhaps, but founded on the sand of bad science.

All such believers in social perfection are manipulators. They want to forget the press of the past, to dismiss evolution as a fever dream that will pass, if we merely Think Right.

A symptom of this has been the drift toward androgyny. The outright manifestation is the growing number of sex change operations. These are anatomically crude — a long way from add-water-and-stir clones — and psychologically high-risk.

Yet they spring from an underlying philosophy that is widespread: that you can fix up the hormones, tinker with the genitals, and make yourself over. Cast off your sexual hangups! Trade in that old set of synapses! Buy the new, new, NEW (fill in sex of your choice).

John Varley's sex-change utopia is not a useful fictional/laboratory for trying out our sexual stereotypes, because it, too, is based on a stereotype — Malleable Man. Fictional lessons, if they are to be used, must make some contact with our real lives. And we are not infinitely changeable.

There are helically stored, immutable instructions impressed into the human brain, and these cannot ultimately be ignored.

One of the central lessons of our century is that the opposite ideal has produced vast police states. The program of the Soviet Empire and its imitation, client states was to bring about the millennium by conditioning the populace. Orwell — arguably the greatest English sf writer since Wells — saw clearly that communists and Nazis alike thought they could produce a New Man from the tattered cloth of ordinary folk, given enough conditioning. Orwell was terrified that it worked too well. Luckily, time has proven him wrong — but it was a near thing.

Why do we learn so little from such a clear case? A proper regard for the irreducible traits we carry would lighten the hand of the reformers, make a wiser world.

In sf, our concern for mind-body dualities and man-machine interfaces ignores a singular fact. Our minds aren't cleanly divided along a software/hardware divide. Our software, if you like, redesigns its hardware over time, laying down fresh pathways, modifying others. Synapses build anew as you sleep.

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Our sexuality — polymorphous and powerful as it is — will not abide easy changes in the "software." Hormones and neurological wiring can't be neatly patched, trimmed, deleted, copied or edited.

The weight of what we have been is considerable. A woman who has been a man is not the same as a woman who has never been otherwise, or wished to be. Freedom, even the blithe liberty technology can convey, is both the ability to change vectors, and having the weight of character to make changes mean something.

Our dreams of escaping our selves, escaping even history, is in the end the longing for a kind of triviality. Transsexuals can strive for the Other, but they cannot ape the embedded hormones, the delicate balances of glands, the full and weighty life that the mind-body synthesis commands. Motherhood, fatherhood, the ecstasy of union — these are not experiences detachable from the rest of life.

To be interchangeable may make us more free, but it would also make our lives matter less. Sexuality, it seems to me, can be aided by technology only at the margin. Abortion, contraception, sanitation — all help. In the decades to come, biotechnology will far transcend these rather simple options, presenting us with fresh choices which will excite us, horrify us, tempt us, and provoke endless arguments — all dancing about one central question: who are we?

We are the thinking beings moored in the body. We will always have pangs of love, of jealousy, of loss. Men and women will always clash, because they have different sexual strategies. This struggle is part of the sexual specialization we see in our bodies, which evolution in old Africa has made moderately different.

Difference brings us agony and amusement alike. The tension between men and women is part of our power. The same stresses which make for romantic comedy helped us transcend the veldt.

Even in the glitzy techno-future, we cannot solve our problems and remain recognizably human by slicing up the human experience into sanitized, detachable parts. The unconscious, and the body it is deeply rooted in, will be heard. ☙

Comments (and objections!) to this column are welcome. Please send them to Gregory Benford, Physics Department, Univ. Calif., Irvine, CA 92717. For e-mail: gbenford@uci.edu.

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Since Felicity Savage sold her first story to F&SF *in the winter of 92/93, she has become one of our most popular new writers. Roc Books published her first novel,* Humility Garden, *to critical acclaim, and she has several other books in the works. At the time of this writing, she is also one of the five finalists for the prestigious Campbell Award, given to the best new writer of the year.*

Felicity's past stories for F&SF *have been historical fantasy. "Cyberfate" is a departure, a science fiction story of breathtaking depth.*

Cyberfate

By Felicity Savage

KAZAKHSTAN. ME AND Jon're standing in a jumble of rocks outside the scarred bubbletown that the last people who gave us a lift went into. Sunlight whites out the sky. Cars zip past overhead, so far up that I can only see a glinting stream flowing from horizon to horizon. Sweat trickles down inside my whitesuit. I hope they don't start the civil war again until we get the hell *out* of this skanky little republic.

I close my eyes, concentrating on the rainbow-on-black display behind my lids which is worldspace's version of the airway, and stick out my info thumb. *Help us out,* I yell in my street-gleaned English, *please, we gotta make the Western Hemisphere by p.m.! Come on you motherfuckers! Tight asses!*

Right now the cars overhead are seeing my and Jon's I.D.s flash up, proving that we're safe, but nothing changes, all the little blips keep moving. Eyes still closed, fumbling with the wrist flap of my whitesuit, I peel the skin back from my inner arm and key the signal to keep repeating.

Open. Over by the bubbletown, near-naked women and kids with cancerous skin are hoeing what looks like red dust. Now and again they glance suspiciously at us. They have lasers slung across their backs.

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A mutant rat scuttles between the rocks.

Jon flops down on our suitcase and heaves a sigh. His protective suit billows around his gangly body. He doesn't say anything, but I know he's remembering that he told me to leave my whitesuit in our apartment for Daqing City to confiscate along with the rest of our things. I hated leaving the minute Mother died, but something cracked in me, and I knew it was our only chance. No Chinese, not even NPRC cadres, expect a daughter to take off when her mother's not mourned or even buried. To get back at us, the city'll sell everything Mother had, everything me and Jon had, too, to start paying off her death taxes.

Government uses taxes to grab you and suck you down. Once someone close to you dies, that's it, you're screwed. Jon didn't care: he'd have been happy to sink into the snowdrift, scribbling away at his novel, as long as I was beside him. I made him come cause I need his citizenship to get into America. He told me the temp in Boston reaches forty C. Well, how was I supposed to believe him? I never was anywhere that there isn't snow on the ground, and it's acid, too. Even little kids know if they take off their whitesuits, they're dead. I don't think I could take mine off now. It'd be like ripping out my trodes. Nakedness.

Jon opens his eyes and says in *putonghua*, which I must admit he speaks as well as I do, "Xiao. I just found a bounty the Vanuwes put on my head three years ago. You haven't used my I.D. to hitchhike, have you?"

"No." I scowl at him. But inside my hood, I suck my teeth in worry. He doesn't risk offending me unless something is seriously wrong. "'S probably a blanket trace on anyone linked with your father. Jesus, your trodes dropped out of worldspace six years ago! They only took notice of your dad three years ago!"

He squints behind his visor. "Xiao, I've been scouting. The Vanuwes've expanded since they swallowed my family's corp. Their prints are everywhere. It really wouldn't be good if they found me."

Shit, I think, and I slither my hand inside my sleeve and blank Jon's I.D. off the signal. Pray Buddha I haven't done something really dumb. "Don't be so stiff. They probably don't even *care* about you."

"Xiaoling, they killed — "

"I know." I recite in singsong, looking into the sky, "Jon Carneira senior wouldn't let himself be dicked over. Straight operator in a crooked world.

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Poor motherfucker. So the Vanuwes killed him, killed his whole family, and swallowed your corp."

"I don't think they're going to give up until they finish the job."

I don't buy the saintly picture Jon paints of his father, but I'm ready to believe these Vanuwe ratfaces killed old Carneira, if only cause he screwed *them* over. We have Vanuwes in Daqing, too, on a lesser scale. Like my boss at Kuocorp. We used to find bodies in suits down the sewers all the time. But Jon seems too innocent to've had a corporate for a father: he's committed his life to writing a novel on paper. Paper! No one's gonna print it, let alone read it, not even in America, and he says he doesn't care. He has straight brown hair, no physique, and old-fashioned specs that make his blue eyes blend into his pale skin. I accepted his proposal *before* the Vanuwe disaster, when I thought he would take Mother and me back to America with him in a couple of months. Even then, I was scared her immuno-resistance was weakening. Then a distant relative of Jon's came by, traveling under a layer of aliases a kilometer thick, and told him what happened. So he never went back. But by then it was too late, I'd married him. I had a good few sleepless nights over that one.

His only redeeming feature, as far as I can see, is that he's crazy over me and will do anything for me, though I've never let him lay a finger on me. (And Mother used to ask why we didn't have any children!) Even on our wedding night I wouldn't share a bed with him, so he let me have the bed and he slept on the floor. Sometimes, indoors, when I take off my whitesuit, I see him following me with his eyes, but he never ever tries to force himself on me. Don't make me explain. I can't. But I tell you this, it makes having things my way taste a bit sourer than I expected.

"Well, if the Vanuwes're that single-minded, they're sure to find you sooner or later," I tell him, not cause I believe it, but to provoke him. *I* think we can beat them at their game. Hell, cyberspace is *my* game! Sitting in a software plant all day's so damn boring that it makes you red hot for whatever you do at night. And if that's not sex, you're bound to get pretty good at *something*. I think even in worldspace I can cope. I know Daqing cyberspace inside and out: me and the girls from Kuocorp thought we were such punks, using it as a hangout, a place to escape our husbands when we couldn't hit the sewers for the snow. I guess we never really realized we were living in a bubble. But at five this morning, me and Jon hit Tibet, and I nearly passed out. Worldspace is like a crowd of people murmuring at you day and night,

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pressing so close you can't move. I can't believe Jon grew up in this static. But he didn't get trodes until he was twelve, he told me, in America it's illegal to implant them any younger than that. At home they implant you as soon as you're born.

Maybe that's why the NPRC is the most powerful nation in the world, and America is sinking deeper into anarchy every year.

Me, I don't care if it's one howling wilderness, as long as I can get in, get a divorce from Jon, and get free. No Mother keeping on and on at me about grandchildren. No school. No Kuocorp. Nothing.

I look at Jon. His shoulders are hunched. He worries his lower lip. His hands wring each other like two mice fighting inside the sleeves of his protective suit.

"But maybe they won't bother," I say cruelly. "It's not like you're any *danger* to them."

His back straightens. His Adam's apple jogs as he swallows. The sun shins on the tip of his nose. "You're wrong. I'm going to hunt them down. And carve my revenge out of them."

"*Jesus*," I say disgustedly. He is deadly serious. I turn my back on him *Tan Xiaoling Carneira, Jon Carneira!* inside my head, and east of the bubbletown, a car is swooping down, growing larger and larger, stabilizing its forward motion with thrust until it settles in a puff of dust. "Come on!" I run toward the car. I leave Jon to carry the duffel, as a matter of fact to come or not as he wants at this point cause I'm really pissed off with his stupidity. I hide my relief that the car has stopped. I was afraid we'd be here forever, alone. I hear a report, and laser sizzles on the shell of the car. It bounces with the impact, like an impatient child. *Hurry, hurry!* flashes in worldspace. I start to run. Jon flounders behind.

"I am writing a novel," Mr. Melchisedec P. Assad says in English as we merge up into the airway with a muted roar of thrust. "That is why I pick the hitchhikers. I am harvesting material from the shores of the world. As the beachcomber strolling along the sandy shore, or the oily promenade, these days, but let us not be distracted by details, as he harvests the fruit of the tides, thus, *thus* I harvest the experience of the human race." He has a florid, dark face. Meaty hands on the steering-wheel. This car's the chilliest thing I ever saw. The Kazakhs' beat-up Puffster disappointed the hell out of me: *this's*

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more like it. Soundproofed, so you can actually talk. Room behind the suede seats to stand up and stretch your legs. Before we took off from Kazakhstan, Assad poured us all cocktails, calmly ignoring the laserbeams zinging on the shell of his car.

"I can't believe this," Jon says, grinning broadly. When I first saw him, sitting in the back of my schoolroom my senior year, looking out at us with a pad of paper on his knee, he had this same retarded grin on his face. "I'm writing a novel too!"

"Really? On paper?" Assad turns to him.

"Yes! I'm fictionalizing the resurgence of Communism in China."

"But this is fascinating. My work with history was also my inspiration. Ancient myths and legends; actual paper fragments; papyrus; stone — "

"Mr. Assad, if you're any good, you should write *real* novels," I say harshly. "People *read* those. Even back home, in this little Chinese city I'm not gonna name, we used to swap cartridges at school and access them when we were supposed to be doing microelectronics."

This is what I say in *putonghua*. I don't know how my patchy English mangles it. But he has listened gravely. "But, my dear, the book on paper is not basically a communication tool, but an art form. Has your friend here ever explained it to you in detail?" I can see that even if I say yes, he's going to explain it again. "The words are printed one after another. No layering. One can only move through it in one direction, forward, and the ending is a fixed thing: it does not respond to the wishes of the reader!"

"But aren't *you* having trouble committing to a single resolution?" Jon breaks in. Happy as a baby. Forgotten all about his precious Vanuwes.

I get up, leaving them interrupting each other so passionately that Assad takes his hands off the wheel to gesticulate, and move back. I lock myself in the tiny rest room and stare into the mirror. Flick on the faucet. Wet my hands, drag them down my cheeks.

Why did Jon ever fall in love with this? What does he see in this specter?

Black hair chopped off raggedly around my face; rat-tail coils round my neck like a choker. Skin that's never seen sun. Little slit eyes. People tell me I look Korean. I'm as fat as a swaddled baby in the phur-lined whitesuit Mother bought me for my fifteenth birthday.

Mother. Because I had to get to the west, you don't even get an honorable burial for all the years you gave me. I rip the whitesuit off, bumping the door

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so that it quivers in its flanges. Stuff it in the toilet and flush. With a monstrous choking sound, the whitesuit vanishes, and I imagine phur mixed with sewage fluttering down on a mile-wide area of Turkestan. At least now I can see my body. My collarbone is as sharp as the ridge that a metal-wheeled bike leaves in the mud. It makes shadows in the valleys of my neck. I wear khaki Army cast-offs and a red brocade shirt that I didn't want to leave behind, held together with safety pins. I undo a pin, lift the shirt. My stomach is literally concave. I'm losing flesh off my bones. I need a food pill. Too bad.

Both men turn to look at me when I come out. Mr. Assad's eyebrows go up and his thick lips purse. "Keep your eyes on the fucking air, man," I say, and Jon wraps an arm around my waist and drags me close to him, violently, so that I am squashed between the two front seats. Mr. Assad smiles and says something to Jon in a language I think is French.

"Melchisedec is very kind," Jon says, not in *putonghua* but in the Daqing dialect that hardly anyone uses. His voice is expressionless. "He's treating us to a free vacation at Legend. We're going to stay with him in his penthouse. So we'll put America off for a week or two, okay?"

"What's Legend?"

Assad hears the word, beams at me and says proudly: "My creation. I have never married, so I suppose one could say that it is my child."

Jon explains, "It's an adventure park. Based on the myths and legends of the whole world. On a manmade island off the coast of Eritrea — that's a country in East Africa. It's supposed to be the world's Eighth Wonder."

Shit. I'm reminded of the way my boss at Kuocorp used to invite the prettiest girls to stay at his climate-controlled mansion in Beijing. "Why the fuck are we going?"

"Xiao, I don't think we have much choice."

I stare at Assad. He steers dexterously, arms wrapped round the wheel like it is a girl. He is smiling. The cyberspace visual, in a tank embedded in the dashboard, and the realtime visual both show cars flowing slowly backward on either side of us. He is speeding.

I wrap my arms around myself. "Dirty old Euro — " I am close to tears.

Jon lowers his voice, and I realize he's afraid of bugs, translators, or whatever else, and that he's right. "I think it's me."

"He wants *your* scrawny ass?" I twist away, look Jon up and down. Can't imagine anybody *ever* thinking he is —

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"No!" He lets out an explosive sigh. "He's connected me with the bounty posted by the Vanuwes. I should have expected this. Shouldn't have been so open with him. His kind is always ready to recycle their own mother for a few bucks."

"In the Master's *name*," I hiss. I grab Jon's shoulder. Mr. Assad waggles an eyebrow inquiringly. So fucking deceptive, that fat friendly face. Still in Daqing dialect, "Come on, there's gotta be parachutes, ejectors, something —"

"Don't be a little idiot!" Jon *never* talks to me that way. I fall still in shock. "Men of this kind don't travel unprotected! We know the car's fully laserproof. We're sitting in a maximum security vault. There'll be explosives on every door, on the controls, on the bloody air vents — "

And I see the visuals have changed. We're swooping down out of the airway into a dense swarm of cars, stubby-winged pastry puffs swooping past so close they fill the windshield, and then without warning a happy-faced clown brandishing a book painted on a landing pad plummets up at us as fast as if we are falling.

SECRETS OF THE TAROT!"

The smell of chocolate fudge wafts across the fairway. Saliva fills my mouth.

"Relive your ancestors' lives! New bio-memory tech!"

Do I love this place or does it make me vomit? Can't make up my mind. The info-burst at the entrance said this part of Legend is designed to look like a Moroccan souk, whatever *that* was. As noisy as Kuocorp gates at the end of a shift, I can tell you that, and the stall keepers got a blistering hard sell. The sideshow bouncers're even worse.

"Do you have criminal tendencies? Accredited phrenologist tells all!"

"The ambrosia of the Greek Gods! Only one credit!"

And all the time, boulders, which are actually cars filled with laughing, screaming people, whistle overhead, hurled by a red-haired giant who (the part of him I can see over the booths, anyway) looks fucking realistic even though he's twenty meters tall and anchored to the ground. On the other side of the souk, the boulders are landing in a tank of sea. The drops splatting on my face might have come from there, or they might just have come off the chickens being boiled in that stall there. I'm gonna buy something to eat soon.

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Real food. Not pills. I wonder if I'll be able to digest it? Jon could tell me, but he's gone. Finished. Dead. By this time anyway.

I get my ears pierced. My lobes are flaming hot and the earrings feel funny against my jaw — but I have to do *something* to celebrate.

"I flatter myself in believing you will like the park," Assad asshole said to me after breakfast, when we were standing in the ninetieth-floor lounge of his scraper, looking down at the huge, wobbling, flashing bubble that covers Legend. "Many of our patrons are regular customers. As water flows to the low places. We hardly need to advertise anymore."

Jon smiled sickly. What's he doing quoting the Tao? I thought, and I didn't answer. I couldn't sleep last night in spite of us having had a waterbed; Jon didn't either. We lay there on our backs not speaking.

Over by the other window-wall, an African girl in violet chiffon, an old Japanese man, and a couple of American kids — hitchhikers too, suckers who Assad caught just like he caught us, for whatever they were worth — were playing cards. Some game I don't know. They were laughing. You're gonna get chewed up and spit out, too, I warned them inside my head, and I looked down through the glass. Far off over the sea, I could see Eritrea, like a shadow. Mr. Assad grabbed my hand in his big soft one, making me jump. Digging into his trousers pocket, he stuffed my fist with Legend credits. I haven't even counted them yet. "Buy yourself something pretty." He sounded almost worried. "These rags simply don't do, my dear."

"What about you and Jon?" I said suspiciously. "What you gonna do?"

Jon grabbed me. He was pale, his lower lip red with biting. "Get out, Xiao!" he whispered. "Don't you see? He feels *sorry* for you! Don't waste your chance!"

He was right. What was I thinking? "Sorry. Yeah." My heart thudded. Ducking my head to Assad asshole, I went for the elevator. I could feel Jon wanting me to wave or blow a kiss or something. I didn't. While I dropped like a stone in the gilded box of the elevator, so fast I felt dizzy, I said aloud, "You crazy, girl? Fuck America! Fuck Jon! You're free, right now right here, free!"

And I like this place. Hate to give that to Assad, but I do like it. 'S chill. Assad was right about my rags, too — I've caught quite a few tourists giving me funny glances cause my Chinese face and my punk hair and the cast-offs all together mark me out. As soon as I find the right store I'm gonna buy —

"The Three Fates tell your darkest secrets! Proved right time after time!"

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The bald, near-naked bouncer grins at me. "Don't you wanna know if you really love him, Punksie?"

"I'm married," I say, but then I remember I'm not, not anymore.

I glance up at the velvet-draped entrance. Blink into cyberspace — the cloth's real, the bouncer's just a collection of interface chips. Almost desperately, I think, I gotta spend some of this cash! I duck through a gaggle of Indian tourists and stick a thousand-credit bill in the bouncer's hand.

"That's a lot of money, Punksie — "

"Better not charge me extra, skanker," I say. But I barely glance at the change he gives me before I slip inside.

The noise of the crowd shuts off like somebody hit a switch.

Panic. I can't see, but I can feel the open space all around me. More space than could possibly fit in the booth. More space than ought to fit in this whole goddamn bubble.

And my eyes adjust to the light. And the sun is brilliant, fresh, and I'm standing on a green cliff under a huge blue windy sky. Far below, the sea murmurs on rocks. On my other side, grassy dunes roll gently away into a haze. The slopes are dotted with yellow-and-white flowers. The wind blowing in my face smells salty. Nothing moves in the whole huge vista except my hair, ruffling in the wind. A drop of sweat runs down between my shoulder blades. There isn't a sound except the sea on the rocks.

And my rat-tail lashes my cheek as I break, and whirl round, gasping, but the entrance is gone, it's *gone* —

Eyes shut. Cyberspace.

You *idiot*, Xiao.

Colored mesh on black shows me the form of a low, empty tunnel stretching straight for a hundred meters. The booth. Nothing to be afraid of. It's all an illusion. Only one way to go. Straight ahead.

And then there's out.

But you're not gonna back out, are you, Xiao? Your mother always told you not to take no risks, syáujye, cause the officials they all the time look for somebody to pick on (and outside the tunnel, the souk is teaming with color-mesh people, information coating their surfaces like oil, like they're in a giant's stir fry) and that means you just about *have* to stick with this, don't you, Xiao?

Nails dig into palms. Breath ragged. I open my eyes.

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Violet bowl of sky. Woolly clouds skimming along the horizon. Relax. I kneel down: the turf smells sharp. This is green itself. I pick one of the white flowers and put a petal on my tongue. Of course there's no substance to it, but it evaporates with a bitter taste that makes my mouth go all sweet with saliva.

Fuck, the sea's a long way down.

A sandy path leads away in the direction I know I have to go.

I start walking.

The wind whistles softly in the grass. The path curves and dips and then dives over the edge of the cliff. I look down. There's a ledge carved out of the reddish rock. Steep, but I can see places for handholds. I edge down. My hip hurts for real when I bang it on the rock.

And the cliff vanishes from under my hands and I tumble sideways, into a square, sunken pit brimful of sun. Three sides are vertical rock; the other is open to the view. Every time I move, I crush flowers that cover the turf like thick pile on velvet.

I see them.

One of them is blonde.

One is dead.

So is the third.

All three of them are — *were* — white girls my age, or a little older, sprawling naked against the back of the pit.

"Ask and we will answer," the living one says. She has a throaty accent which I think is Eastern European. She sits in the middle, with an arm around each of the others. Both of them have lips parted and eyes half lidded like they're sleeping, but the way their limbs are jumbled tells me they're ready to be dressed for burial. "You need keep no secrets from yourself any longer." Her eyes go blank for a moment. "Tan Xiaoling Carneira. You are a defector from the New People's Republic of China. You are eighteen. Your father died when you were three. Your mother died three days ago."

"What the fuck," I whisper in amazement. Then I remember. This is a damn good illusion — but that's *all* it is. They're cybervisions. Illusions. I shut my eyes.

The undulating wall of the tunnel, rainbow on blackish-red. No blinking bits to indicate that any new chip is interfacing with my trodes.

Open. Three girls.

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Close. Nothing.

Open. "You're real," I say stupidly. "You're real. But you don't have trodes."

"Ask and we will answer." Another one is speaking now. The one on the left. She's a brunette and her breasts are a bit fuller — but she was *dead*!

"Who *are* you?"

The blonde slumps against her side, eyes vacant, reflecting the sky, one hand slack on the other girl's thigh.

"We are Scarecrow, Nightmare, and Stickjoint. What do you wish to know?" Scarecrow's forehead wrinkles briefly. "Your mother died when—" and her voice shifts, so that if I didn't know better, I'd think I was hearing a recording of myself — "when the heater went on the blink in the middle of the night — "

And the voice changes — "and you just shivered and curled tighter, too tired to get up and fix it, and when you brought her her morning tea, she lay spread-eagled on her back, frozen, with her mouth open where her soul got out." It's the third one. The redhead. Stickjoint. "Oh Xiao," her voice breaking, "your memories." The sun glows in the frizzy curls of her hair. "My sisters — " she looked down at them, pats their shoulders companionably, but they don't answer, they're dead — " They can't really understand you, I don't think. I'm the youngest. I have the best idea of what it is to have to live in a welter of illusions, the way you outsiders do." She fixes me with a green gaze. "Just let yourself love him, Xiaoling! Why do you torture yourself like this?"

I won't hear this. I won't. I grab her hand, rubbing the skin suspiciously. It's warm and smooth, but old scars bracelet her wrist. "Who are you? Where do you come from?"

"Is that what you want to hear?" She curls her fingers around my hand. I wrench away. "We're triplets, congenitally joined at the mind. We have only one life between us. It's a documented condi — "

Her eyes roll up, and she slips sideways. Nightmare thrusts herself upright. Her voice vibrates with emotion. Her eyes stare. "We were born in Rumania. Xiaoling, never blame yourself for your mother's death. You did all you could for her, as she did for you, flesh of her flesh. *Our* mother sold us to a traveling circus. She was afraid of us. We nearly lost our minds when people crowded around our cages, ogling us, because we could not keep from speaking all of their memories at once, disjointedly. They thought we were

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speaking in tongues. They moved us to a church. It was Melchisedec Assad's kindness that saved us. He bought us and brought us here, where we are safe. He is not made to live in this world, any more than we are, and so he understands us, in the way that he understands the other strange, sad creatures who serve here..."

Assad asshole? *Saved* them?

Stickjoint sits up and smiles at me. My heart steadies. She's stabler than either of her sisters. I think she is sane. "Yes, Melchisedec is a good man." She reaches to the side, and it looks as though she picks a long-stemmed pink flower and holds it to her lips, but her throat bulges, and I know she's drinking because her hand is curved as if she is holding a cup. There's something underneath the illusion, then, though I never was anywhere so real as this sunny cliff. Never saw a blizzard as vast as this sky.

"Where are we really?" I beg. "Are we sitting in a little dark tent? Where?"

Stickjoint laughs. "You climbed six flights of stairs. You didn't know it, though — there is an illusion that protects our privacy. From outside, the house is camouflaged even to cybersight. Right now my sisters and I are sitting on our futon; you're sitting on the floor. I can see the souk through the window behind you. We've got a cybervision set, a kitchen, a jacuzzi — we're very comfortable."

I work my fingers into the turf. The flowers smell like nothing I have ever smelled. Such an enormous gap between illusion and reality, and it's so difficult to see any gap at all — Nightmare sits up again, pushing Stickjoint's body aside, and my voice spills from between her lips. Daqing dialect, nearly incomprehensible with passion. "I love him. Oh God oh God, I love him, and I'm letting him die, just like I let Mother die. But it's not too late. Not this time. Assad's harmless; the Vanuwes're the real danger and Assad doesn't know to protect Jon from them. It's a horrible mistake. I have to go back — have to go back — "

I scramble to my feet. Fireworks of knowledge burst inside my head. Sick knowledge I can't ward off any longer. Can't take my eyes off Nightmare's blue eyes, her cascades of real hair in the false sunlight. Can't shut my eyes to retreat into cybervision and erase them from my safe electronic world of lines and information. I reel backward. Rock crumbles under my boots, and I'm falling

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through the side of the booth

fighting my way free of the folds of velvet. I'm in a narrow, dank alley between two booths. The smells of chocolate and olive oil and burnt sugar hit my nostrils, and the voices of the tourists crash into my ears like cymbals on either side of my head, and I stagger under the sheer weight of sensation. The bouncer looks down the alley at me, frowning under his bald unreal brows. "Punksie!"

I take off at a run.

And they're all around me now. I see them in the corners of my eyes: the nuggets of reality hidden in the tawdry, skanky mosaic that is Legend. The eye of the red-haired giant throwing the boulders meets mine, and his lips part in astonishment, and the next boulder wobbles in its flight. A Greek cook drops the chicken he is about to decapitate, and it flutters away as he stares at me. My shirt ripples around my body. Mother saved up to buy it for me. It's beautiful and festive, but at the same time red is the symbol of my nationality. But I can't escape the NPRC either, can I? No matter how far I go —

and as vividly as a cybervision I see the farm where the cloth was produced, a boundless sea of cotton in southern China. Farm robots knuckle like metal apes between the rows. Waves of shadow travel across the whiteness as the breeze blows.

Back in realtime. Assad's scraper is visible in the forest of things towering ahead. I dash out of the gates of the souk, across the plaza. Why do I feel this urgency? Assad is exactly what he appears to be, an eccentric trillionaire novelist with altruistic tendencies and a flair for reality. But Jon doesn't know that. Crowds are driving me crazy. Swerve around little kids, bump into a grandma. Each breath shreds my lungs. Inside, flash the wristpatch Assad gave me at security, into a waiting elevator. Collapse against the gilt wall. Piped music tinkles in my ears.

After we get somewhere safe —

"I know it's sort of weird to say this after three years." I'll smile. "I want to thank you for being so patient, Jon. Did you know it would take this long? Or were you just holding out? It's chill, love — " And I'll hug him. And maybe even kiss him. On the mouth.

The elevator doors shush open. The African girl lies on the carpet, clawing toward me. Her back is blown away, her violet wrap fused to the remains of her ribs.

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Oh God, oh Master, Allah, Confucius, Jesus. Shit.

The corridor to the lounge is littered with the bodies of Assad's hitchhikers. I pick my way between them, trying not to get blood on my boots, trying to keep quiet. Whoever it was might still be here. My heart hammers. I'm shaking. Was it Assad? Am I wrong? I *couldn't've* been, the Fates couldn't have lied to me, not them *and* the giant *and* the Greek cook — they told me he was all right, he was *good*, and I was looking for danger in all the wrong —

Christ.

Jon. Half-lying on an elegant sofa with a gaping rip out of which the stuffing flows in a shiny, fused waterfall. Blood trickles from his nose, and from an awful wound on his torso which he has tried to stanch by knotting his shirt around his ribs. Melchisedec P. Assad sprawls beside the sofa, dead as a doornail if not having much head left is anything to go by, and there probably isn't another one hundred percent good person left in the world. But I don't care, and I try to take Jon in my arms. But he goes as white as paper, and I jerk back. I bury my face in my hands, struggling to keep control.

"Hhhhh — darling — " His hand hits my back. He's trying to comfort me. "Get out. They're still *here*. They're ransacking the place — "

"The Vanuwes. They came." *Too late* —

"Not them. Bounty hunters in their pay. Never thought — " he smiles on one side of his face — "never thought I'd rank higher on a bounty hunter's wish list than a man like Melchisedec!" He shuts his teeth, breasting a swell of pain. "But they killed him."

"Wait. Bounty hunters — how'd they get in? What 'bout security?"

"Disguised themselves as parts of Legend. Melchisedec was too trusting. Left himself wide open to false appearances. Danger in disguise. Like me. I lured them here. I caused his death." He pushes me. "Get out, Xiao — "

I'm about to tell him I love him, and hold on, tell him to hold on, because even if he can't move security's *gotta* figure out what's happening and if we can just stay alive for the next few minutes...when I hear a table being shoved over behind me and someone says in a harsh American accent, "Fuck-all in the east wing, Marge. Marge! Where you at?"

"Hush, King. Hush. Quite a nice little haul I have here." And a giant chicken, two meters tall, strides with its head bobbing into my line of sight. First off it doesn't see me. The woman inside the the holosuit must be counting bills or jewels. Then the chicken windmills backward, startled, and a laser pokes out of its chest feathers like a broken metal rib. Grotesque.

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"Child, I would suggest you raise your hands. I'm going to shoot you, but first, who are you? Is there anyone else? Is security alerted?"

I think about throwing myself at her. But somewhere among the potted plants and furniture, there is the other one. And I don't kid myself I'm faster than a laserbeam. I raise my hands.

"I'll do anything you want!" Jon chokes with an urgency that makes tears spring to my eyes. "Don't hurt her! Please! Anything!"

The muzzle swings. Laughter crackles inside the chicken, as if it is grinding rocks in its craw. It's a damn good illusion, right down to the beady eyes darting between us, as if we are tasty insects it can't choose between. "Mmm! Shall you tell us where your novel is hidden, then? You told us you'd die rather than see it destroyed. Changed your mind? We know *that* is the thing most dear to you." She laughs again.

"It's in the medicine compartment over the bathtub in the north wash room." Jon has my hand. He's rubbing it as if to keep me real.

A polar bear even bigger than the chicken, so big its head flickers in the ceiling, waddles straight through the sofa. The weight of the man inside the illusion dents the seat beside me as he scrambles invisibly over the back of the sofa. "Love it, Marge," he says as he passes her, heading for the north wing, for Jon's novel. "Beautiful. The high-minded little prick. He deserves it."

Marge laughs, but the silver mouth of the laser doesn't waver again until the bear returns with the heap of fluttering pages. Then, still staring at us with the chicken's face, Marge aims upward and incinerates the pages fifty at a time as the bear tosses them at the ceiling. I dig my nails into Jon's palm. I sense that he can't stand watching the work of six years being destroyed, but he can't take his eyes off it, the same way I couldn't take my eyes off Nightmare as she told me my secrets. His face is a mask. Blood is dripping from his nose into his mouth, but he doesn't seem to notice.

"All right, girl." The chicken pecks at my face. I feel nothing, of course, but I press back into the gaping rip in the sofa. Marge lets out her gravelly laugh. "Gonna get along okay without your little punk geisha till we reach Boston, Carneira?"

The man inside the bear pulls me upright.

"You'll skanking well have to, that's all."

White flickering fur envelops me. I wonder how long it's going to take to die. Time seems to stretch as Marge levels her laser. I am back in the cotton sea, squinting in the white southern heat (the bolls are like whorls of light in

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my hand); twigs snag my clothes as I shuffle along, unnoticed by the metal orangutans in the distance, gripping my picking sack...

And the cotton fragments in a shower of broken glass and laserbeams coming from the elevators. Real sun pours in through a smashed wall. Heavy, with jags in it, like half-frozen orange concentrate. I think at first I am dead; then I realize it is security, arriving too late to save Assad or Jon's novel (and why am I thinking of Jon's novel when I am standing like a block of wood in the middle of the crossfire, dying?). Too late. The bear and chicken spasm jerkily, like flickering, perforated ghosts with gnarled cyborgs for cores, and I hear shouting, and something sears the back of my neck.

IT'S ALL OVER. They let us go, reluctantly — they wanted live criminals, not dead ones. But eventually they realized that because of the evidence, they couldn't make a legit case for us having killed Assad. Thank God for Rat laws.

Poor old Assad. I still think about him sometimes. When I look at someone dying, for example, and try to remember why people were ever created.

Once the officials of Rat World get their claws into you, they never let go. We're on our way back to China. Just two more deportees, shipped from Legend through Saudarabia to Kabul, Afghanistan. Jon spent three months in the hospital there — Security stitched him up on the scene, but he needed some serious recuperation. I helped out with the kids at the holding point so I could stick around, too, and wait for him.

Now we're in a slow carrier to Beijing.

I rest my head in Jon's lap, making the best of the space we have on the cold metal floor. There's only so much room, cause the carrier was stripped down years ago, and by mutual consent, families with children get the most space. Young people like us make up most of the deportees. But I haven't seen any non-Chinese besides Jon. A fuzzy-headed kid tumbles over my feet; I grin at it to distract it from crying, and pull up my knees so it can get past, tilting them sideways against our Government-issue duffel. Jon strokes my cheek, gazing into the dark heights of the carrier. He has a faint smile on his lips. "What are you thinking about?" I ask.

The smile broadens. "Being here. With you."

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"I still think you were stupid to come," I say severely. "You're not an NPRC citizen. Nobody was making you. Eritrea police would've filed your grievance against the Vanuwes. You would've got your revenge. Damages enough to live on for the rest of your life. Stead you chose this."

He smiles, shaking his head. "The Vanuwes aren't the kind of people who'd be put off by a grievance."

I break into a grin. "*Jo-on.* I wanted you to say it."

"What? That I love you?'

"Yes."

He bends down and kisses me. A man nearby smiles tiredly at us.

All around, depressed, vacant, resigned faces. I know the story: life savings wasted, nothing but taunts and penalties to look forward to at home. But you have to hold onto something. You have to make some gesture so you can hold up your head. "Why didn't you at least file a grievance?"

He shrugs half shyly. "When that laserbeam went through me, I knew revenge didn't mean anything. It never did. That was the turning point. I used to lie awake asking myself what I'd do in different situations; the novel or this, the novel or that. But after death looked at me out of a laser muzzle, all my choices were easy."

"I'm gonna hold a memorial service for Mother when we get back," I say. "They'll have recycled her body already. But that doesn't matter."

Jon nods. "Good."

Embarrassed, I look away. The young mother bounces her toddler up and down, singing to it under her breath. It grins across its face. One pearly tooth. "Cute little morsel," I say.

"Cute little morsel yourself." Jon fingers the place where my rat-tail was seared off.

"Don't," I say, grabbing his hand, unable to stop myself from squeezing until it must hurt. "That tickles!"

He brings my hand up and kisses it. I shut my eyes, almost overwhelmed by love.

And the carrier roars ponderously on. I can tell from the noise we're low in the airway; wallowing in the slipstream of exhaust pissed out by the westbound traffic, Japanese, Korean, Siberian cars and the limos of the NPRC ratfaces who feed off our blood, flying to Legend, or even to America.

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Last month, we published a near-future horror story by Robert Reed. This month, he returns with the story that inspired our Terry Smith cover, "The Tournament." About the story, Bob writes, "After twenty years of running and racing, I'm having my best year in the sport. Like the character in 'The Tournament,' I'm on a roll. A statistical fluke, no doubt. But it's a pleasure nonetheless."

The Tournament

By Robert Reed

THE RCUND OF *1 048 576*

The Net calls everyone it selects. That's the rule. Always at five in the afternoon, Eastern Double-Daylight Time. Always on the Friday before June's first Monday, the bulk of the month reserved for little else. More than a million phones sing out at once, their owners picking up as one, nervously hoping to hear the Net's cool, unruffled voice giving them the glorious news. Another Tournament is at hand! The best of our citizens will be pitted against each other, in a myriad of contests, the single-elimination adventure culminating in honor, wealth and an incandescent and genuinely deserved fame.

Some contestants like being with friends when the call comes. Not me. Bette claims I'm scared of being embarrassed by a silent phone. Maybe so. But I think it's because my first call was a surprise, coming when I was a kid — barely eighteen — and expecting nothing. I'm at least as superstitious as the next idiot, I'll admit it. And I was alone that first time as well as every time since. This is my seventeenth Tournament; I like my atmosphere of anxious solitude, thank you. And I won't change one damned thing.

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Five o'clock. My phone sings, and my hands shake. Opening the line, I watch my viewing wall fill with the Net's milk-on-jade symbol, and the expected voice says, "Hello, Mr. Avery Masters. You are ranked 20,008 in the national pool, forty-seventh in your district. Congratulations, sir. Details will follow, and as always, the best of luck to you."

"Thanks," I manage, breaking into a smile. Forty-seventh is my best local ranking ever, but in truth, I'd hoped for better. My training has been going great; all my qualifying tests are up. But then again, who's to bitch? Positive thoughts, positive results. That's what coaches tell you. With that in mind, I brighten my smile, reading about Monday's opponent.

Ms. June Harryman — a district legend. She's deep in her eighties, both hips plastic and a carbon rod fused to a regenerated spine. She's made fifty-one appearances in the Tournament, including its very first year, and while she never finishes high, she's always there, always full of pluck, always garnering local praise and national mention.

No, I think, I can't ignore the lady.

Don't look past tomorrow, coaches tell you. Even if tomorrow isn't for three days.

Our morning event is a 10K race, and the Net has given Ms. Harryman a twenty-five minute head start. That's a brutal lead, I'm thinking. It's probably as much for her hips as her age. Then comes our afternoon game— some kind of puzzle; that's all I'm told — and in the evening, in a tiny studio not ten minutes from my apartment, we'll go toe-to-toe in U.S. geography.

I bet the old gal knows a lot of geography. What could be worse, I'm thinking, than being knocked out in the opening round by some low-rank half-artificial grandmother?

When the phone rings again, I mute it. It's probably Bette calling to congratulate me, then tease me about my opponent. Except I'm not in the mood to be teased. Just to feel confident, I start naming state capitals. And I forget Guam's, which puts me into a panic. I'm taking a refresher course when Bette arrives — a breasty, big-hipped woman strolling into my apartment without sound. I barely notice her as she turns through dozens of sports channels, finally finding what she wants on the Net and cranking up the volume until my ears hurt.

"According to friends," says a well-groomed reporter, "she felt chest pains as she reached for the phone. It was five o'clock exactly." A lean, white-

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haired woman hovers over his shoulder. *Ms. June Harryman.* "An artificial heart is being implanted — "

"What?" I cry out.

" — with Ms. Harryman's long-term prospects deemed excellent."

"Didn't you know?" Bette's round face smiles, thoroughly amused. "Hasn't it told you?"

It means the Net, which has to know. The Net handles emergency calls, controls every autodoc, and identifies consequences in an instant. Of course it knows.

A light blinks on my console. Punching the button, I hear:

"Mr. Masters, you have a bye for next Monday." Infinitely patient and incapable of amusement, the voice gives no sign of being impressed with my remarkable luck. "Enjoy your weekend, sir. And we'll see you on Tuesday morning."

524 288

Reach the first round, and you're guaranteed a few dollars. It doesn't pay for a cheap treadmill or two hours of forced hypnosis, but it's a wage, and for some people it's all they want. The illusion of being professional, that sort of thing.

Payoffs accelerate slowly at first; you need to get out of the first week before you earn a living wage. Win your district — my goal of goals—and you'll have a comfortable life. But then come the regionals and the authentic wealth. And if you can defeat all twenty of your opponents — one of us does that trick every year — the Net awards you a billion dollars, tax-free, then transmits to you every congratulation from every one of your forgotten cousins.

Bette says the Tournament is silly. She says that a happy, wealthy nation needs better obsessions. But I don't take her teasing too seriously; I'm naturally confident and self-assured, I hope. And besides, she lets me tease her in turn. I like telling her she's one of those stuffy souls who pretend outrage, knowing they lack the talents needed to win. "Poor Bette," I say, without mercy. "Poor, poor Bette."

I make a fair living with these June competitions. Then for the rest of my year I'm in training, always preparing, always working my body and mind into shape for next year's shot at immortality.

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After Tuesday's competition, Bette calls to congratulate me.

"Did you watch?" I ask.

"No," she lies. "I just saw your name posted, that's all."

It was my first day of real competition, and I'm already among the last quarter million contestants. Today's opponent was a man-child, a giant built of muscle and sinew, and for the morning's contest I was the one awarded handicap points. That's how the Net keeps things interesting. It has files on our body types, muscle types, age and general physiology, and the formulas it uses have served well for half a century. Even with my handicap points, I was behind at lunchtime, the man-child lifting a mountain of iron over his bony brow. But in the afternoon, sitting in a VR booth, I piloted my biplane in combat, downing dozens of enemy craft and taking a healthy lead into this evening.

Bette tells me, "I didn't know you were such an expert in algebra."

"So you watched, did you?"

"Me? Never." Her face covers my wall; she doesn't bother softening it with a vanity program. "That was pretty cocky of you, telling that kid to lift quadratic equations for a change."

"You did see it," I shout.

She says, "Never."

She tells me, "I just hear the gossip, that's all."

I yawn, then say, "Bette, you know the rules."

"You need your rest. I know." But before she vanishes, she says, "I just wanted to tell you, I've got a feeling about this year."

"What feeling?" I ask, trying not to seem too curious.

A wink, an amused grin. Then she says, "Never mind." She waves me off, saying, "You need sleep, and never mind."

262 144

I wake from a dream where I'm throwing basketballs in neat arcs, each one dropping through a hoop tinier than a bracelet.

Some competitors pay big money for implanted dreams.

This dream is genuine, which makes it feel like an omen.

Wednesday's opponent is a smallish woman, not quite young, and she shoots from Xs made by the Net, her marks closer to the hoop than mine. As is fair. Early on, either because of nerves or simple bad luck, she misses a string

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of free throws, then more distant shots. Then we play some one-on-one, weights on my shoes, and I blow past her just the same, getting out to a fantastic lead. She's so demoralized that she doesn't even finish the afternoon's puzzle, throwing its plastic pieces across the gym floor, then stalking off in tears.

I want to tell her, "The Net notices. That isn't going to help next year's ranking, doing that crap."

I want to say, "Play hard and face the consequences." But instead I concentrate on my puzzle, finishing it in half the allotted time. It's a geometric wonder full of shifting rainbows, and I take it to the nearest robot, placing it on the offered hand as the sexless voice says, "Your opponent has withdrawn, Mr. Masters. Thank you, sir, and until tomorrow.... "

131 072

WE RACE diamond-frame bicycles in the morning, my opponent given a substantial head start, and after fifty kilometers of hills, wind and a sudden rainstorm, I finish just twenty meters behind her, in a virtual draw.

In the afternoon we navigate VR landers over a cratered landscape, two hours of hovering and repeated hard landings leaving us even closer in the standings.

My opponent is new to the district. She's smart, tough and capable of a withering stare. Tonight's contest is natural history, and as I take my podium, one hand fiddling with my buzzer, I glance her way and show a weak smile, claiming, "You'll win. Easily."

"Shut up," she advises.

She says, "I know all the tricks, son."

Old enough to be my mother, yet made of sterner stuff, and I have to admire her. I win by points in the end — by almost nothing — and receive a fair amount of local coverage as a consequence. ("Early round dramatics!" That kind of thing.) But what's memorable for me is my opponent's whispered offer to see me later. "After you lose, darling boy." Romantically? I wonder. And she laughs, saying, "Hot wet sloppy fun," and giving me a lecherous wink.

I'm polite in my refusal and secretly intrigued.

Later, lying awake in bed, I wonder if her offer is genuine. Or was she attempting some kind of trick with my spirit, in revenge?

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65,536

Friday, and I'm fuzzy. Stale. Half-dead.

Marksmanship is the morning's hell — rifles, shotguns, bows and arrows, homemade spears — and I end up deep in a hole. My opponent is a child, barely twenty and lucky to have made it this far into the Tournament. We play a board game in the afternoon, my strategies crippled by his wild maneuvers, and finally, with a ragged attempt at being the good sport, I concede defeat to the little shit.

In order to live for the year on my winnings, I need to make it to the second Monday.

This Tournament looks like a bust.

But the kid comes from an enclave of fundamentalists, and he hasn't any grip on things as non-Christian as Chinese history. Standing behind my podium, I field questions generated by the Net. I buzz first, then answer. Buzz, and answer. And answer. And answer. Before we've left the Ming Dynasty, I've pulled into a comfortable lead. And then I stop buzzing, letting the boy have his stabs, inexperience giving him penalty points and allowing me to take whatever leftovers are easiest.

Arriving home, flush with victory, I find Bette waiting, all smiles. "He almost caught you in the Mao years."

"Did not," I say.

"What's it matter either way?" Bette has no competitive spark, unless it's her fierce desire not to compete. "Let me take you out for a drink. It's the weekend now. Isn't one little drink legal?"

I feel lucky and at ease with myself. It's not the three beers that make me drunk. It's everything. And later, out of sheer joy, I coax Bette into my bed, using her round, unexcellent body until both of us seem happy. This isn't our first time; we're modern friends, meaning everything is possible. But afterward, in the dark, I start making mental preparations for next week, part of me wondering how I can coax Bette into leaving me, giving me solitude and the chance to recoup.

As if reading my mind, she rises, dresses and goes.

Then I sleep without dreams, crossing a great black portion of my weekend in a limp leap.

* * *

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32 768

Monday again.

Friday's fuzziness is gone. I'm sharp, smooth and self-assured, pounding at white balls pitched by human-shaped, Net-piloted robots, driving them toward a distant fence, then over it. Never, not even when hitting VR balls in my own bedroom, have I been this good for so long. And the handful of spectators — other people's families, mostly — seems caught up in the show, breaking into applause and stomping their feet.

The afternoon's puzzle is a knot begging to be untied. My fingers are magical, touching and tugging, accomplishing the feat in what seems like an instant. Without effort, almost.

The night's subject is geology — rocks to be named; tectonics to be described — and of course I win there, too. Afterwards, I can't even recall my opponent's face. A man, I know. Of my age, I'm almost sure. But his name and every other shred of identity have fallen away, lost.

16 384

She's tall. Strong. Quick.

Yet to make our fight even more fair, she wears hard little boxing gloves and a suit of puffy, self-cooling rubber. We're here to go a full six rounds — the morning's first contest. Both of us work hard to pace ourselves. You can win an event too well, if you're not careful, spending all of your juices too soon. That's why we dance and stab, dance and stab. But then for no clear reason, in the middle of the final round, I decide to charge and strike, driving her back into her own corner, then hammering away with a series of grunting wet ugly punches.

My own gloves are soft and oversized, yet I manage to do damage. The woman's head, pretty in a doll-like way, snaps back as the final bell sounds. Consciousness lost, she topples, *boom*, and lies motionless on the clean white tarp. The Net deploys an autodoc while the robot referee tries to usher me aside.

Awaiting their turns are the other competitors — seated; knowledgeable; enthralled — and thinking of them, I pull away from the referee and stand over my victim.

In a moment of pure theater, I scream at her, trying to coax her to rise and fight me again.

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8 192

THE NET congratulates me; it's become a kind of habit. My opponent — a man of my general age, build and intensity — is being consoled by the same smooth voice. He defeated me in the high jump, then at gin rummy. Then he proved that he knows more about the solar system too, edging me out in our last event. Yet according to the numbers, I'm the victor. I drew lousy cards this afternoon, each card from a thoroughly randomized deck, then played them with all the skill I could muster. That skill was worth a bonus. And since we were almost identical in three categories, the bonus becomes everything in the end.

"Not fair," cries the other man. "This isn't right!"

"Fair or not," the Net reminds him, "our rules are public knowledge, all devised by human beings."

"A poor sport," I offer, not quite whispering.

The Net says, "Yes," through the robot beside me. Then the second robot tells my opponent, "You're welcome to file a grievance, should you wish. I can supply you with names and e-dresses for any human official — "

"Shut up!" roars the man.

I stare at him, understanding him. Neither of us have ever won the second Wednesday. Tensions have their way of mounting, making us into new people. Strangers, even to ourselves.

My opponent notices my stare, then charges over to say, "It likes you."

"Who does?"

An accusing glance at the nearest robot, at its solitary glass eye. Then he seems to lose his courage, taking a huge breath before telling me, "Forget it. Just never mind."

"Go home," the Net advises. "Start preparing for next year, sir."

I've never seen such despair on a face, and that could be me. Shattered. Cheated. Slinking off in shame.

"It likes you," he had said.

I glance at the glass eye, then, as if in reflex, I look far away.

4 096

Eight competitors remain in our district trials.

Our local millions are watching. We can pretend to forget them, pretend

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we don't care about them, pretend every color of ignorance possible. But some of the millions have come to watch today — odd souls who aren't family members, who prefer their sports in person — and with them is an air of expectations, that sense of breath coming fast, then held in the tensest moments.

It's a good day for tensions. From the standard pool of one hundred and eighty-eight physical contests, the Net has selected that event most loathed:

Figure skating.

There are eight of us, none expert. We're not even particularly good, as it goes. I know I avoid skates as much as possible, and my weights and running and other athleticisms have blunted my grace. What matters is survival. What wins is a good double lutz and no falls. Balancing myself between disaster and inspiration, I win technical points from the Net and the human judges, thank god, don't kill me for my lack of art.

Then after lunch, over neat green tables, we play pool, four games running simultaneously, spectators in the grandstand above. Every time I stoop to shoot, I think of Bette. We've played a few times, me for the practice and her for the hell of it. Somehow remembering her sloppiness is comforting, her self-mocking laughter inspirational. Even when I take my bad shots, slop saves me. I build a lead that's enough to weather the evening's contest, which is cooking. And on this day, in a battle between two strangers, I prove myself to be the superior skater/pool player/chef.

Bette's right; this is a silly business.

Sitting at home, I ask the Net, "If everyone in the Tournament played everyone else, and I mean play them in every contest, would the same person win the whole shebang?"

"I can't say," it responds. Without hesitation, without interest.

"This year's winner faces how many of us? Twenty." I shake my head, tossing my reader to the floor. "Twenty of us, and sixty contests. Is that a ridiculous measure of excellence?"

The response is quick but not immediate. There's an instant of silence, then the Net informs me, "Reality is chaotic. I can't calculate all the variables in one contest, much less all that can happen in a full Tournament."

I say nothing.

"By definition," it adds, "every Tournament is inadequate to the task."

I barely listen, thinking my own thoughts.

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"Any more questions, Mr. Masters?"

"Did you know," I ask, "that billiard balls hitting each other lose their exact positioning in space?"

"Yes," it replies. Of course it knows.

I can't recall how many collisions are needed, but it has to do with the quantum vagueness of the universe. Leaning back in my chair, I close my eyes, imagining colored balls in motion — countless; ceaseless — chaos reigning on a smooth green table without rims, without ends.

2 048

It's evening, early.

I've come home to pack, getting ready for Alaska. Bette has come to help, which means teasing me for my tastes in socks. There's just one pair of district competitors left; they cover my largest wall, spouting on about architecture. I should be there, enjoying the applause and flashing lights, but my opponent — last year's district winner; this year's first seed — was disqualified this morning. The Net didn't like the taste of his blood. Using subtle, parts-per-ten-billion drugs, he had tried lifting his abilities just enough to win. As they say, "On the even playing field, molehills count." But then again, how do you hide your molehill?

What, I wonder, was that idiot thinking?

Bette wants to know what will happen to him.

"A suspension," I say. "For a few years, I guess." I close my suitcase, then sag, feeling almost fragile. Last night I dreamt of losing, and I woke convinced that I would lose. Today's contests favored my opponent; I'd had a good run of it this year, I was thinking. Nobody was more surprised by the disqualification than me.

"Why did he take the drugs?" Bette asks.

"To win," I respond, by reflex. "He was looking past me, aiming for the regionals."

She stands beside me, a meaty breast nudging my arm. "Did he really hope to slip past the Net's tests?"

"Some of us do," I grumble. "I've told you the rumors." All the big names — Yang and Fogg, Christianson and the rest — use special elixirs cooked up in dark foreign labs. Their advantage is a hundredth of a second, a question in fifty. No test known can catch every illegal device —

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"What if he wanted to be caught?" she asks.

I glance at her, then try changing subjects. "Come with me. I'll pay your way."

"Since when do you want a cheering section?" She has a hearty laugh and a way of seeing through me. "I thought you preferred your friends out of sight and mind."

"Just this once," I say.

"Maybe," she responds. But later, after making love, she tells me, "No, I should stay home."

"Why?"

"I've got crops to watch."

Bette is peculiar. In a society of wealth and relentless leisure, she raises her own food and makes most of her own clothes. She's something from the Dawn of Man, which I find fascinating, and like a thousand other times, I tease her for it.

She shrugs in the dark, then changes the subject. "I've watched replays of the disqualification. I saw your opponent's face when he was told." A pause, then, "Maybe he didn't know it, but I think he wanted to be caught."

"Did he?"

"He did so well last year." A deep sigh. "What if this year wasn't nearly as much fun?"

I can't understand her point.

"You've always said that all you want is to win the district. You don't expect to ever go farther."

Suddenly I'm glad that Bette is staying home. With a dose of cold fury, I tell her, "Go watch your fucking crops."

I'm more startled by the words than is she.

1 024

My opponent is the fourth seed in our district, the prohibitive favorite today. Beat her, and I'm not just the local champion — our lone warrior against the nation's best — but I'm also one of the year's Cinderellas, guaranteed all the attention that comes to statistical flukes.

For these next two weeks, the order of events is reversed. Mental contests in the morning. The usual afternoon game. And finally, in the long sub-Arctic dusk, a physical contest — something full of drama to captivate the distant throngs.

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Today we're running 100 meter sprints, 512 identical races held in and around Anchorage. I enter it trailing, but not by much. To win, I have to make up my opponent's head start, then pass her, winning by a leisurely .3 of a second. "Just do a great race," I tell myself, settling into my starting block and looking at a string of lights — red, red, red, green. I wait. My opponent goes with her green light and a sharp tone. I wait. My red lights run to green — *beep* — and I leap up, racing the length of my narrow black lane, working to relax, to breathe, then extending my chest at the finish, twisting my head sideways to watch the numbers appear on the giant scoreboard.

"No!" I won by .299 seconds, which means, I realize, we have tied. An equal pile of points has been awarded to each of us, and we'll have to run again.

"Rest," we're told, by the Net and by our gracious human hosts. "You'll go again in an hour. Relax."

An hour later, we run mirrors of our first races.

Again, we tie.

This is big news. Huge news. In the next hour, every sports network and mathematical hobby channel sends reporters to supply interviews and inane commentary. A hyperactive fellow dances around me, begging for my thoughts, goals and dreams; and in lieu of honesty, I sputter clichés. "Concentration wins," I say. "One stride at a time," I say. Then gazing into a hundred floating, sparrow-sized cameras, I wave and say, "Hi, Mom!"

Everything is the same for the second rerace — the lane; the crisp air; the dreamy remoteness of the world — but this time I try willing myself to greater speeds. I roar out of the block. My opponent is a distant form, and then she's forgotten. I make my legs burn. My lungs burn. I punch my chest through the laser beam, and turning, my eyes fuse on the board.

This is Hell.

My time hasn't changed, not by a hundredth of a second.

For the rest of my life, I realize, I'll have to race this race, never able to win, never willing to lose.

Then I think to look for my opponent, puzzled that she isn't standing where I expect. What's happened? A bent, hobbling figure is in her lane, the right leg bloodied by a terrific fall. I never saw her fall. I was too focused to notice, although tonight, in my hotel room, I'll watch the event a thousand times. Straining for speed, she tripped over her own foot, colliding with the ground and sliding, then rising, staggering toward the useless finish line.

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The Net speaks through the scoreboard, saying, "Congratulations, Mr. Masters. You are champion of District Three-Eleven."

The woman is in agony, face streaked with tears, the healthy fresh blood streaming along her leg. Wanting to be the good sport, I walk toward her; when my hand is offered, she slaps it away. When I say, "Next year," she tries to kick me with her bad leg.

"Get back!" she shouts. "I'm racing here, asshole!"

512

THIS IS WHO I AM:

I'm that jerk at the party who knows everything about Byzantium, the chemistry of phosphorus, dog breeding, homosexual Presidents, and the fate of the Universe.

I'm the guy taken third for a pick-up game of basketball, then sinks ten circus shots in a row, winning the game for his team as well as winning the hotdog reputation.

I'm a tower of confidence, admired by some, envied by most, and generally perceived as being distant. Remote. Cold to the point of glacial. (Although that's far from fair.)

I'm a mortal — prince, stable boy or whomever — who just might have once been touched by the gods.

And now, maybe for the first time, I realize how I look to others. I find myself surrounded by myself — the 511 other district winners — and there comes a powerful urge to wilt, turn to dust, and blow away.

I'm not qualified to be here.

There's only one other competitor with a lower rank, and I'm watching her charge through the obstacle course, through mud and hoops and across greased rails and rope bridges. She's a portrait of focus and sputtery white energy. I envy her. We're performing in a giant stadium filled with screaming fans, yet I seem able to hear her strong breathing, the wet grunts, and the squish of mud underfoot.

On a slippery slope, she plants a foot and turns too quickly, the *crack* like an explosion, lingering in the air long after she has collapsed.

"That knee's finished," says the competitor beside me, his tone almost amused. I recognize him. He's Elijas Fogg, this year's Number One seed: a tall and handsome man. No, a beautiful man. He's not my opponent, yet he seems

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to know me. As the crowd moans in one voice, he turns and remarks, "Well, now you're their favorite."

"Whose favorite?"

He smiles as if facing an idiot. "Who do you think?"

The spectators? Is that who he means?

"Now you're the one most like *them*." He grins with effortless menace, no set of teeth more perfect than his. "Among us, you're the closest to being average. Ordinary." A pause. "Pathetic."

I don't know what to say. Before us, robots lift a squirming, mud-caked figure onto a stretcher. Perhaps in response to the suffering, Fogg asks me:

"Do you know why *they* love the Tournament?"

The spectacle of it? The competition? Or the pursuits of glory and excellence?

I say none of those things.

His head lifts as if posing for some dead Greek's urn. "They love watching us claw at each other. They adore watching us crash and burn." A sideways glance at me, then a bitter smile. "Almost all of us fail, and the bastards drink it in."

My bastards, I tell myself.

"Mr. Fogg," I tell him, "you've always been an inspiration for me."

Of course I am, his face seems to say.

Refocused, reenergized, and given a sterling cause, I conquer the obstacle on a dead run, beating my opponent by just enough. Then I take my victory lap, trotting past the roaring crowd, arms overhead and my bastards on their feet, the air itself seeming to nourish me with its love.

256

The Net wakes me at seven-fifty, as asked.

When I want details about the day's competition — my opponent; the events; the logistics — it supplies accurate, thorough answers, anticipating most of my follow-up questions. Through the course of the day, it keeps me aware of time and my schedule, the scores and what I need to do to lead, then what I need to do to keep my lead. When I want a snack, its nearest robot delivers hard candy and half an orange. When I pull a muscle during warm-ups, it prescribes a legal anti-inflammatory, administering it through one of its autodocs while lowering my handicap by a mandatory amount. And when I win, the Net tells me, "Congratulations," with its changeless voice, nothing

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warm or unwarm about it, no trace of involvement, and nothing behind the words but an unshakable politeness.

Meanwhile, without fuss or failures, the Net runs our factories on the earth and in orbit. It manages our power grid, our stock markets, our information systems, and every entertainment that requires its talents. Mistakes are made — thousands every day, none major — but even the mistakes help perpetuate the image of seamless competence. The Net and several competing human agencies find and measure each failure, and guess which count is always, always the most accurate count.

Victorious and grateful, I lie awake in my softly lit room, listening to new thoughts. I ask to see the Net's symbol — a branching white tree on a background of stylized green humans. In a low voice, I ask, "Do you ever hold your own Tournament?"

"Toward what end, sir?"

"Pit your subsystems against each other. Give awards to the most incompetent ones."

"But for what purpose?"

"Your winner can be named the most human."

The Net says, "My subsystems don't resemble organic life."

Yet I don't care, smiling to myself, telling it, "And our winner is the most Net-like. What do you think? We can put them together. Send them out on a date, maybe."

I laugh, asking the silence, "Wouldn't they deserve each other?"

128

In my youth, without a trace of affection, classmates called me Avery Allosaurus.

Old hobbies never leave a person. Thirty years later, I find myself unearthing all kinds of intellectual fossils, smashing my opponent in the morning's contest. It's pure luck that the topic is paleontology; my opponent is left punch-drunk, desperate. Sure, he wins back points while fighting inside a VR battle tank. But not enough points. I've got such a lead that in the evening, as we climb different portions of the same rock wall, he elects to leave his safety lines behind, trying to scamper to the top unencumbered, goat-style.

I can't see his fall, but I feel it.

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I feel the crowd below turn to ice. Without sound, people watch the tumbling figure, that perfection of the human species no match for the rocks below. Then comes a moan and collective shudder. My opponent is this Tournament's first death; a distinction is won.

Bette calls me afterwards, ready to console. Yet I don't feel guilt or sorrow. "He's to blame," I say, shrugging my shoulders. "I didn't remove the ropes, did I?"

Bette looks tired. Unhappy. Wise. She's calling me from her cluttered house — I've never liked that house — and she tells me, "I rather miss you, Avery."

I make some appropriate mirroring noise.

She says, "You're doing well," with a sense of disbelief.

I need to be stretching, and reviewing. But instead I laugh and say, "You should hear the talk about me."

"Like what?"

"I'm a jinx, people say. Going against me is dangerous. The Net loves me, and it stacks the events against my opponents."

"Oh," she exclaims, as if in pain.

"You should see them, Bette." A pause, a grin. "Some of them are actually terrified of me. I'm the lowest-ranked person to make it this far in years, and they're scared."

She nods. Then she says, "Stupid."

I agree. "You think *I'm* superstitious. You should see these people, Bette. All day long, it's rabbit feet and rituals."

"All of it's stupid...!"

"But the thing is, I believe them. I am jinxed. I'm dangerous. The Net adores me, and it helps me. All that just makes me more confident."

"Idiotic...."

"I couldn't have fallen tonight, Bette." I almost believe those words, adding, "And if I had fallen, somehow, I would have just sprouted wings and flown the rest of the way!"

64

EVERYONE has their favorite Tournament winner.

Mine, without a microgram of doubt, is Leonard Dab. In '81, I was a boy not quite thirteen, at the age where heroes appear when you expect them. Dab was just un-

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likely enough to catch my attention and sympathies. A veteran of almost thirty Tournaments, he'd never finished higher than the fourth Monday. Small and gray, he was a sinewy alley fighter, past the age of perfect recall and dependent on old joints and handicap points. Today I realize why old Dab has been my favorite. There have been greater victors, and prettier ones. When I was sixteen and hormonal, the infamous Mattie Yung killed her opponent in the nineteenth round, in a karate match; and of course I fell in love. Then there's William the Conqueror from '79 — the largest point total of all time. Or Stef MacGraw from '51 and '53 — the only two-time winner. But no, still and always my favorite is the plain and unlikely Leonard Dab, the Cinderella of his year, and now, after so long, my inspiration. My unwitting mentor.

Last night, after the final competitions, the Net randomly selected Tournament history for the morning's competition. It's not a remarkable choice, but it's fortuitous for me. Late-night studies can't make you an expert before dawn. Just ask my opponent. Our M.o.C. is the best in her profession, reading the questions without favoring either of us; yet I can tell she expects me to answer first, and correctly. What's the biggest, fastest, longest, smallest in the Tournament? Who did, who didn't, who should have, who perished? Amid flashing lights and musical tones, I thrive, building a lead worthy of its own trivia question. Out of a thousand available points, I win 907. Even when I lose the next two contests, I remain entrenched in the lead, the Net just waiting to the end before offering me an official invitation to the *Week of 32.*

The M.o.C. congratulates me, then invites me to dinner in her hotel suite. Twenty years my senior, but lovely, she's the product of good genetics and every available beauty aid. In the middle of the night, trying to rest, I ask how many Tournaments she's worked in. "I started in '67," she replies, "and I haven't missed since."

Knowing there's no chance of it, I ask, "Did you meet Leonard Dab?"

She takes a quick breath, then laughs. "Did I ever!"

"You did?" I sputter.

"For an old piece of oak," she informs me, "he was a spry little maniac in bed."

I lie still, calculating the odds.

And now she isn't holding me, but my hero. The hands still touch me, but their curl and a new gentleness imply someone else. Someone treasured.

* * *

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32

Over the weekend, according to the Net's errorless count, I receive three million requests for introductions, interviews, business partnerships, other partnerships, product endorsements, and a crisp little message from Bette.

"Remember me?" she asked yesterday.

It's Monday — lunchtime — and I need a distraction. I call her, and the Net finds her outdoors, working in her shaggy garden. With a joking voice, I ask, "Haven't you been watching me?"

A stony expression, a shrug. "Now and again."

"It's going great," I tell her. Then I launch into a rambling, self-congratulatory speech, boasting about my current lead and my opponent's miserable prospects. This afternoon is chess; I'm really very good at the game. Which means I'll take that event and hold on through tonight's pole vault —

"Who are you?" Bette interrupts.

I hesitate, for an instant.

"You look like Avery," she says, "but he was a bearable asshole."

"What's that mean?"

"You're boring," she says. "And worse than that, you're silly." She pulls up a random plant. Weed or not, it doesn't seem to matter. "Why are we talking? We've got nothing in common."

With the charity of a minor god, I decide that she's jealous. It's a question of my success, and it's understandable. "Nothing's going to change between us," I assure her. "Soon as I'm done, in a few days, I'll come home and treat you to anything you want — "

"I'm doing what I want now," she says, her voice certain. Rock-solid.

"Are you?"

What does the woman want?

"When you lose," she asks, "what happens?"

I give a quick snort, then explain, "I'll start training again. I'll get ready for next year."

"*But why?*"

"Haven't you been paying attention, Bette?" I point a finger at her sun-washed face. "This is what I do for a living. Remember?"

She starts to speak, then hesitates.

"What? What is it?"

She opens her mouth, saying nothing.

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"Say it!" I plead.

"I guess I feel sorry for you."

Now I'm mute, a mind geared for chess finding itself in a new game. How can she pity me? It has to be jealousy, a fear of losing me. I try to leave things unresolved, smiling before I tell her, "I'm sorry you feel that way."

Once again, she says, "Remember me?"

It's the same voice, but it's not a plaintive cry for attention. Not at all. Like one friend bidding adieu to another, she's asking, "Will you remember me?"

"Hey — !" I begin.

She vanishes with the stab of a thick little finger.

16

I am beaten.

That's the verdict going into Tuesday evening. Yesterday I survived a poor game of chess, making an inspired vault to hold my lead. But that won't happen tonight, and everyone knows it. Suddenly the other competitors and their entourages begin to smile at me, knowing the point totals, feeling enough at ease to congratulate me on my luck and determination. "You've made it interesting," they concede. "Interesting is good. At least for a little while."

Tonight's event is a ski run, the snow freshly made and refrigerated — a long white ribbon winding down a green mountainside, made all the more treacherous by a warm Alaskan day. I haven't skied since last winter, excluding VR trainers. My opponent is a better-than-good skier, a three-time Week of 32 finisher, and she last skied in late April, honing her reflexes on the Greenland icecap. I can't win, and even I know it. How could I have ever hoped to beat these people in this business? With nothing to lose but my joints, I take the mountain like a madman, slicing over the finish line and fifteen entourages beginning to cheer, knowing how it will end.

My opponent follows. She doesn't exactly crawl down the mountain, but she knows better than to take chances. She always knows her time. She leaves herself ample cushion. On the tight turns she looks like a talented novice, poles biting the ice, a radiant smile growing by the moment, her victory in the proverbial bank.

Caution keeps her on the course too long.

Ten or fifteen seconds too long. No more.

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The earthquake arrives with a terrific jolt — not a big quake, but one focused beneath our locale — and my opponent falls, then regains her feet and form. But then the sun-softened ice panics, shaking and sliding downhill, a terrific fluid mass pouring onto the flat ground, spreading like a fan and nearly drowning half of the entourages.

As it happens, nobody dies.

But my opponent never crosses the finish line, and the line itself has vanished. Acts of God are covered in the Net's copious rule book, and despite a century of predictive science, earthquakes remain godly events.

By default, I'm declared the winner.

And still, despite the intervention of the Almighty, the Net merely says, "Congratulations." Its voice is as constant as gravity. "Until tomorrow, sir. And best wishes."

I'm standing in a meadow, watching slush melt.

No human wants to come near me.

They won't even look at me, I realize. They are that impressed and that afraid.

The same as me.

8

Today's opponent — a popular, highly seated individual — just happens to fall down a set of stairs in the morning. He claims it's an accident, though a Net security camera saw him pause on the top step, dipping his head a few times as if in practice, then taking an elegant, athletic dive.

Intentionally or not, he gives me another win. By default.

With hours of free time, I decide to borrow on my winnings, purchasing gifts for friends. I send to Bette an expensive crystal vase made on the moon, and a gross of rootless roses, and the deed to a hundred hectares of prime black earth. I compose two cards. The first card reads, "Of course I'll see you again." But I don't send it, preferring my second attempt. "I want to see you. I want to see you now."

That card and my gifts are taken on the next hyperplane.

By evening, Bette has given the land to a wildlife foundation, and the Net delivers her bloodless "thanks but no thanks" note.

I'll hate her, I decide.

Soon as I have time.

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4

My opponent arrives on schedule, but without her heart.

Certain people in the Tournament hierarchy are furious about yesterday's default. It diminished our audience, and this may not be the record year they'd anticipated. My opponent has been warned that if she won't compete today, she'll suffer, the threats as ominous as they were vague. She tells me everything as we wait to enter identical VR booths. Wearing plastic armor and holding short plastic swords, we'll become generals in Alexander's army, our afternoon to be spent hacking the heads off Persians. Holding her weapon in mock defiance, my opponent tells me, "I'm not afraid of you."

I say nothing.

"Luck is statistics," she claims. "You've been lucky, but doesn't that happen to one person in a million?"

Yeah, that's what the cliché says.

"And luck doesn't care what happened yesterday." She means to sound profound, but it comes out bitchy. "If yesterday's asshole had shown up, he would have beaten you and beaten you badly."

I touch her breastplate, waiting for her gaze.

Then I ask, "So why are you afraid?"

Eyes widen; her sword drops.

"I'm scared of myself," she admits. "What I 'know' isn't what I 'believe.'"

I believe I'll win, and that's what happens. Her heart isn't in the game, and she loses despite a last minute surge in the evening's sculling. In the end, I take the fourth Thursday, gaining entry into the most exclusive and hallowed realm imaginable.

Save one.

The Round of 2

I'm awake, alert.

Despite a night of little sleep, I've never felt so alive.

Just as I'm ready to leave for the morning's contest, a man arrives, his calm voice telling me, "We have her." I hired this man last night. In a rented hyperplane, he and some associates flew home, running an errand for me. "All things considered," he warns me, "she's in good spirits."

Bette is brought to me.

On the wall of my penthouse suite, Elijas Fogg eats his customary breakfast in public view. His entourage — relatives, staff, friends and lovers

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— fill every table in the restaurant; his manner is calm to the point of icy. I've been studying him. Without looking at Bette, I say, "I'm glad it's him. Do you know what he thinks about ordinary people?"

"Not much, I'd guess."

I grin, turn. "Are you all right?"

She doesn't answer, standing in the middle of the enormous room. Smoldering.

I can't blame her, but there's no time for apologies. "I've got a question for you, Bette."

"So ask it," she says.

"On the first Tuesday, you told me that you had a feeling about this year's Tournament. You implied that it would be special — "

"Avery," she snaps, "I tell you that every year. You just forget it when it doesn't come true. That's all."

I'm watching Fogg chewing on his ritual English muffin topped with grape jam. I keep hoping for a trace of fear, a hint of weakness. That the man seems perfectly at ease unnerves me. Suddenly my breath quickens, my mouth going just a little bit dry.

"There's a bigger tournament than yours," Bette adds.

The words strike my ears, but it takes my mind a long moment to string them into a coherent whole. By then she's saying:

"Think of all the sperm in the world, Avery. All those frantic little boys with their wriggling little tails. How many actually find their egg? One in a billion? In a trillion?"

Probably less, I suppose.

"We're here, Avery. But a trillion trillion other people are never even born. Never get the chance to exist. See what I mean? Existence dwarfs this bush-league contest of yours, which is just as it should be."

I say nothing, watching Fogg wipe his mouth with a folded napkin.

"Being alive is an enormous honor. Nothing else compares." Bette almost touches me, then pulls away and tries to laugh. "Don't I sound maudlin? It's probably the stress of being kidnapped, don't you think?"

"I've got to go," I mutter.

She says, "So go."

I make myself stand, then I tell her, "Stay here. Or I'll fly you home, if that's what you want."

"That's what I want."

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Fogg rises to his feet, and with a quiet, confessional voice, I admit, "All I want is to beat that bastard."

And Bette says, "I'm sorry," with genuine misery.

The *1*

IT'S THE MOST watched Tournament day in history — ninety-nine percent of all Americans — and that despite my losing each and every round in turn.

During the final event, wrestling on a sweat-slicked mat, Elijas Fogg works me into a twisted position, then uses a questionable maneuver to break my right arm.

Mouth to my ear, he whispers, "You're just another bastard. Again."

The Net congratulates him, then me.

While an autodoc sets my bone, reporters swarm around me. What are my thoughts? What are my plans? With my new wealth I can train with the best coaches, in the topflight facilities. Of course that's what I'll do, they assume; when I tell them I'm retiring, they're visibly shaken.

"It was a fun run," are my concluding words.

Fogg stands on the other side of the arena, and he's making noise about winning next year. He as much as promises to become one of the authentic greats in Tournament history.

Can Fogg really repeat?

My audience abandons me for richer fare.

Turning to my autodoc, I ask, "What are the odds that in our universe, in the foreseeable future, I'll be reassembled from the atoms? I mean *me*. Just as I am now."

The Net responds in an instant, that liquid smooth voice saying, "I don't know how to accurately calculate such a number."

It's funny. All the time and sweat spent mastering so much, and it never occurred to me that life was such a golden, splendiferous reward. Not once, and it's funny, and the Net asks if I'm in some distress...I'm laughing that hard....

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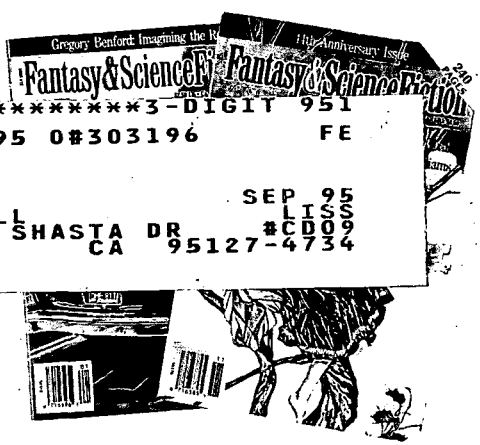

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